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Role Transition of National Football League Retired Athletes: A Grounded Theory Approach

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SPECIAL REPORT

**ROLE TRANSITION OF NATIONAL
FOOTBALL LEAGUE RETIRED
ATHLETES: A GROUNDED THEORY
APPROACH***

GEORGE EARL KOONCE, JR.**

EDITORS' NOTE

As the concussion litigation against the National Football League (NFL) continues to grow¹ and the league settles litigation related to using the likenesses of retired players,² the challenges faced by retired players have come to the forefront. In 2012, former Green Bay Packer George Koonce studied the transition players go through after their football career ends. This research culminated in the completion of his Ph.D. dissertation "Role Transition of National Football League Retired Athletes: A Grounded Theory Approach." As the news media has already acknowledged,³ this

* George Earl Koonce, Jr., *Role Transition of National Football League Retired Athletes: A Grounded Theory Approach* (Spring 2012) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University) (on file with law review). A full version of the dissertation will be available in May, 2014 on Marquette University's digital institutional repository at http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/171/.

** George Koonce played professional football for a decade, the majority of those years with the Green Bay Packers, winning the Super Bowl XXXI title. Since his playing career ended, he served as the Senior Associate Athletic Director at Marquette University, as the Athletic Director at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, as the Director of Player Development for the Packers, and as a special assistant to the athletic director at East Carolina University. Koonce received his Ph.D. from Marquette with his doctoral dissertation focusing on the transition of NFL players from active players to retirement. His guest column on the same topic on the NFL blog received national notice and raised awareness for the problems faced by retired NFL players. Currently he serves as Director of Development at Marquette where he works with the Urban Scholars Program, which affords first-generation college students from diverse backgrounds opportunities to receive college educations.

¹ Paul D. Anderson, *Plaintiffs/Former Players*, NFL CONCUSSION LITIG., http://nflconcussionlitigation.com/?page_id=274 (last visited Apr. 3, 2013).

² Michael David Smith, *NFL, Retired Players Settle Lawsuit over Use of Players' Images*, NBC SPORTS (Mar. 18, 2013), <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2013/03/18/nfl-retired-players-settle-lawsuit-over-use-of-players-images/>.

³ See, e.g., Josh Alper, *Former Linebacker George Koonce Uses Post-Football Struggles to Fuel*

groundbreaking research adds a fuller picture to the challenges faced by former NFL players. Therefore, as a service to our readers the editorial board of the *Marquette Sports Law Review* brings you selected chapters (chapters 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, and 12) from this dissertation. The dissertation is preceded by an introduction by Professor J. Gordon Hylton, a member of the Marquette University Law School sports law faculty and a noted expert on the history of American sports.

INTRODUCTION⁴

George Koonce is uniquely qualified to address issues related to the experiences of former professional football players as they make the transition from the NFL to their post-football lives. Not only is Koonce a university-trained social scientist (Ph.D. Marquette 2012), but he is also a former NFL player himself. After an outstanding college career at East Carolina University, Koonce played nine years as a starting linebacker in the NFL, the first eight of which were spent with the Green Bay Packers and the final year with the Seattle Seahawks.

Although Koonce obviously turned out to be a better than average NFL player, he entered the league with little fanfare. He went undrafted following his senior year at East Carolina and, while he was signed as a free agent by the Atlanta Falcons, he was cut during training camp. However, after a season in 1992 with the Ohio Glory of the World League of American Football (a former NFL developmental league which played its season in the summer), he was signed by the Packers and immediately worked his way into the starting line-up. As a consequence, Koonce's own modest origins make him especially attuned to the concerns of the non-superstar player.

Following his retirement from the NFL, Koonce worked for the Packers as the Director of Player Development where his special project was to prepare players for life after the NFL. He has also served as the Athletic Director of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and as an assistant athletic director at East Carolina and Marquette.

Koonce's approach centers around the concept of "role engulfment," a

Doctorate, NBC SPORTS (June 5, 2012), <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2012/06/05/former-linebacker-george-koonce-uses-post-football-struggles-to-fuel-doctorate/>; George Koonce, *Guest Column: Surviving Life After the NFL*, NFC WEST BLOG (May 15, 2012, 3:20 PM), http://espn.go.com/blog/nfcwest/post/_id/65343/guest-column-surviving-life-after-the-nfl.

⁴ The introduction was written by J. Gordon Hylton, Professor of Law, Marquette University Law School. He is a member of the National Sports Law Institute's Board of Advisors and of the *Marquette Sports Law Review* Advisory Board. Professor Hylton received a degree in History and English from Oberlin College; a J.D. and an M.A. in History from the University of Virginia; and a Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization from Harvard University.

sociological and psychological concept that asserts that human identity can be a product of the conscious assumption of a specific role. Originally developed by sociologist Edwin Schurr, drawing upon the insights of Erik and Kai Erikson, “role engulfment” was originally applied in the arena of criminal deviancy, but other sociologists have expanded the concept into other areas including athletics. Koonce in particular seeks to apply the insights of Patricia and Peter Adler’s 1991 book, *Backboard and Blackboards: College Athletics and Role Engulfment* to the experiences of NFL players.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION—GETTING IN, GETTING OUT, GETTING ON

It is becoming clearer to many that, although the life of a National Football League (NFL) player offers the possibility of achieving great wealth, success and elite status in the eyes of the public, many players struggle to establish a secure and satisfactory existence once they leave the sport. In the media, professional athletes are presented as modern-day warriors, intensely satisfied with life and living in a state of perpetual youth, existing in a realm outside that of the rest of the hard-working adult American culture. Recent studies have shown, however, that the decision to participate in elite sports and in competitive life is a complicated one that leaves many athletes in a state of uncertainty about their future (Baillie & Danish, 1992).

The benefits of participating in sport are well known and range from being physically fit and healthy to gaining the admiration of fans and peers to being well compensated financially; but less is known about the risks. More and more attention is being given to the “after-lives” of athletes of all sports, who at times face depression and confusion. Although NFL players make a good living in a highly prestigious and desirable occupation, their playing careers often lead to less-than-desirable “after-lives.” While there are many studies currently being conducted on physical risks of sport such as concussions, this study concentrates on the psychological risks and transition process moving along the continuum from Pop Warner youth football through high school, college and into the NFL. Even though many players escape without degenerating injuries, just about all are leaving with some type of psychological depression, loss of identity, stress and general anxiety.

The transition out of sport may not have to be traumatic if the identity constructed by the athlete has not been limited and has not foreclosed his involvement in other activities and parts of adult life. This study focuses not only on the 21 interviews that I conducted with retired NFL players (fictitious names of individuals are used), but also on the over 2,500 experiences and interactions that I have had. I participated in Pop Warner youth football,

middle and high school football, college football and ten years of professional football in the NFL. I also worked as an assistant athletic director at multiple universities, director of player development for the Green Bay Packers and athletic director of an NCAA Division 1 school. Researchers must continue to look at the earliest moments of an athlete's life to investigate the circumstances of identity construction for the attitude the individual forms regarding participation in activities beyond sport.

Role Engulfment Is a Way of Dealing with Role Conflict

Building on Adler and Adler's theory of role engulfment, this study looks at the ways typical NFL players become so wrapped up in their football identity that they fail to see themselves in any other role and fail to prepare for life after football. High athletic identity and role engulfment are usually related to low academic preparedness, and it is this factor in particular that seems to determine whether or not an athlete will be able to cope well in the years following his participation in the NFL (Adler & Adler, 1991).

When I first stepped onto my college campus, I had three choices. I could have balanced the social, athletic and academic roles that a student athlete can undertake. I could have put an emphasis on one or two of the three choices, but I chose to shed the other two roles and build my dream of being an elite athlete with the hopes of one day playing on the largest stage of all sports, the NFL. On the one hand, this was crucial in my ability to achieve my dream, but on the other, it also made my and many of my peers' ability to transition out of sport more challenging.

Football Career Ends

Along with academic preparedness, early acceptance that one's role in sport will end also seems to have an influence on whether or not an athlete will begin the process of adjustment early and thus at least minimize the duration of the transition period. Whether or not a player has been deselected or leaves on his own also has some impact on how positively he views his transition experience. But more important is to get a full sense of the context of his being deselected. Clearly, players who leave on their own terms are more likely to have been more prepared for their exit and thus avoid the shock of being tapped on the shoulder, asked to bring your playbook immediately to the coach's office, and remove your personal belongings from your locker. To be deselected as a player, he is waived, released or cut from the team. The player is placed on the "waiver wire" and the other teams in the league are allowed to claim him. Basically, the player's contract has been terminated. Some players might be well educated and others might have been involved in different

commercial ventures while playing. Thus, analyzing the level of role engulfment of the player's career well before the moment of retirement is important when giving a full picture of his transition out of football. Furthermore, the factors that influence a player to remain in sport past his point of usefulness are also helpful in understanding his ability to enter into a second profession after retirement.

One thing that became clear to me through my interactions with players throughout my life and after the interviews I have conducted for this study is that intense devotion to sport does not guarantee a positive transition experience. Those athletes who lived only for football ended up suspending or rejecting common sense ideas about saving money, getting an education, having a meaningful relationship with anyone or anything other than football, or partaking in social and life skill development programs that would have allowed them to connect with community leaders and potential future employers.

Class, Culture and Era of Participation

For the most part, I have found that class background, the decade in which the athlete played and the culture of the team have determined the extent to which an athlete gave his all to football. Though players from the 1960s and 1970s still faced adjustment difficulties, they were more likely to see their transitions in a positive light because they were expected to work off-season and to be well-rounded individuals as much as football players. Football was not the "machine" it has grown to become since those decades. Those were the years prior to the mega-network television contracts with the NFL. The first color TV program in the United States was in 1966 when the Green Bay Packers played the Kansas City Chiefs. Given the influx of network television and commercial dollars, increased salaries of players, the devotion required by team franchises, and the excessive media attention paid to football players after those decades, contemporary players are much more devoted to their athletic identities than older players.

After the decade of the 1960s, it seemed that football was associated in the minds of some players with escapist thinking and with naïve hopefulness about what it meant to have a "career" in football. Will Siegel, a player from that era, said he made more money during the off-season than he did playing football. Contemporary athletes from lower classes often forsake their educational preparedness, despite the fact that they associate football with scholarships and a chance to study at good colleges. For some, the lack of educational preparedness seems, ironically, an unintended consequence of participating in sports. Such like-minded athletes pursue short-term prosperity

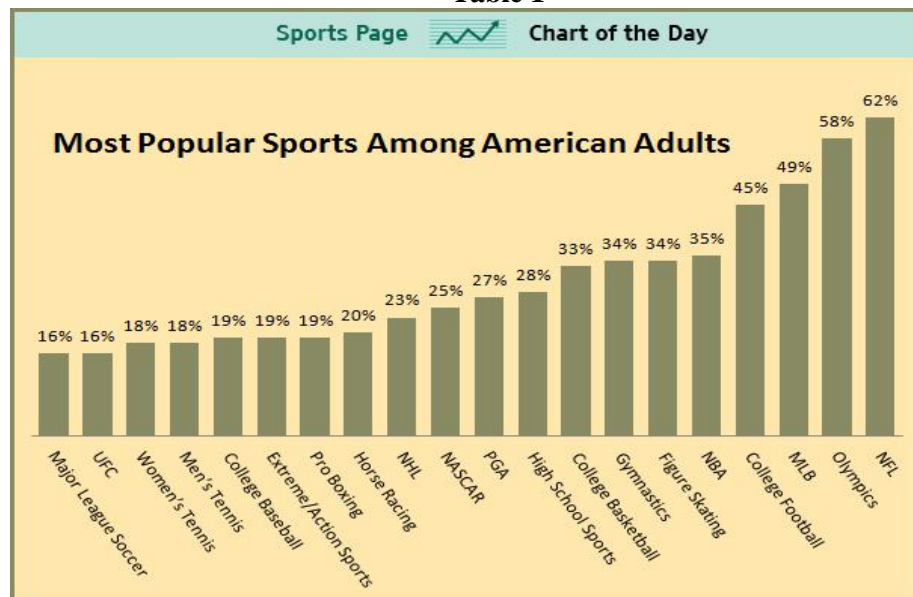
over general life-long satisfaction.

The notion that participating in sports provides a route for upward mobility is no longer a new concept in our society, but a widespread belief.

“Typically, Americans believe that sport is a path to upward social mobility. Poor boys (rarely girls) from rural and urban areas, whether white or black, sometimes skyrocket to fame and fortune through success in sports. The financial rewards can be astounding, such as the high pay that some racial minority athletes have received in recent years” (Eitzen, 2006).

An aggressive desire to play football is understood as a positive reaction to class difference, unlike participation in gangs or criminal activities to survive. The importance accorded this idea in our culture might make it difficult for aspiring elite and professional athletes to ever imagine a downside to the pursuit of an athletic career. Professional sport leagues such as the NFL are even associated with racial integration in the eyes of some. Fans understand sports as spreading American values. Football is the number one watched sport on television, followed closely only by the Olympics, which are televised every two years.

Table 1



(Scarborough, 2011)

For the reasons stated above—not to mention the personal validation that comes from being cheered and recognized by others—inform the decisions of

athletes who are not actively thinking about their future. Such athletes glorify themselves in a process of simultaneous self-aggrandizement and self-diminishment (Adler & Adler, 1991). Their glorified self expands their athletic role with single-mindedness. They are swept away by the taste of stardom and fame; therefore, their commitment is to their athletic role and its associated self-growth beyond what they ever intended or imagined (Adler & Adler, 1991). Financial reward and media attention also divert their gaze from what is happening to their bodies and their personalities. Financial reward seems to have a powerful controlling effect on the psyches of some young men, many of whom come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and are the first in their family to attend college.

“In the United States, the essence of the ‘American dream’ is to have money, celebrity status, youth, and talent. Nearly all of the players in the National Football League are well paid, enjoy celebrity status, are young, and are very talented. It has been disturbing to see how many of our former players, who at age 22 or 23 appeared to have the ‘American dream’ as they entered the National Football League, left the league with broken dreams and disillusionment a few years later...Many professional football players are excellent athletes but have ignored intellectual and spiritual growth. They know how to block and tackle but are limited to athletic excellence” (Osborn, 1999).

During the exit transition phase itself, athletes cope in a number of ways with their loss of status and camaraderie. Each of these will be related to role engulfment and high athletic identity in this study, which aims to add to the growing body of knowledge and further explore how persons who are goal oriented and can handle high-pressure situations while on the field cannot do the same thing under different circumstances. How do individuals with confidence and high self-esteem become people who are depressed, anxious, confused and even angry? I believe the answer lies in understanding the construction of their athletic identity at the earliest stages of their athletic career. Group identification is both positive and negative.

Hopefully, this study will encourage others to think positively about their potential in life after sports and to be proactive in constructing their own identities and life paths. Sports will continue to provide athletes and non-athletes alike a feeling of group membership. Football, like no other sport, is a powerful representative of our human and national potential and, thus, will continue to impress massive audiences.

The interview and dissertation-writing process helped me with my

transition from playing football to administration. Reaching out to others allowed me to experience a sense of validation that was necessary for moving into the next stage of my life confidently. While playing professionally in the NFL, a number of players reported not knowing that their careers would be so short or simply not considering what they might do at the time of retirement. Without thinking about it beforehand, the NFL after-life can be quite a shocking and prolonged experience for some individuals.

Since the issue of transition difficulty is not addressed head on by the NFL, many players end up thinking they are the only ones experiencing adjustment challenges and that those challenges reflect upon them as individuals rather than on the situation of the professional athlete in general. This research shows that these challenges are particularly difficult for athletes playing football, given the time commitment, the way identity is constructed, and the fact that athletes enter into sport at such an early age.

Despite what some athletes hope when they enter the NFL, educational preparedness has a direct relationship to achievement and life satisfaction later on, since attaining a second occupation often means demonstrating skill level and competency in a field that does not provide mentoring or continued supervision but requires independent motivation. The vast majority of players interviewed for this study experienced adjustment difficulties during the transition phase, both immediately after their playing career ended and in the long term. Therefore, becoming a professional athlete can have unintended, long-term consequences. Furthermore, adjustment difficulties seeped into other areas of their lives, causing players to experience family problems and depression.

Over time, player salaries have increased, leading some to assume that life as a professional athlete could be equated with long-term financial security. But extremely high salaries are also part of what makes a career in the NFL dangerous for those who have no experience managing money, especially their own. Though increased monetary rewards complicate athletes' transitions, older athletes also faced retirement difficulties that often lasted up to three times longer than their active days in the NFL.

There is some continuity of experience between older and contemporary groups of players, even if the extent to which they felt these things depended on if and how much they avoided personal responsibilities, academics and career exploration while playing in college and in the NFL.

Adaptation to life after football is challenging for a number of reasons. Players experience initial shock upon retirement followed by long-lasting feelings of betrayal and inferiority. One player talked about the duality of his feelings: how he struggled with the ideas that he had done wrong and also that he had been wronged. He could not understand his identity at the moment or

process his own decisions. Transitioning involves personal adjustment as well as processing a change of identity. Entering the job market late also leaves many athletes vulnerable to emotional difficulties.

The period after sport is made more difficult by the fact that those outside the football “community” cannot relate to what those who played for a long time went through. Those interviewed often mentioned that friends did not have the capacity to understand what they had just gone through.

Transitioning athletes also discussed the difficulty of working in fields that were not highly structured. Their post-athletic careers required a spontaneity and flexibility in decision making that they were not used to after taking part for so long in an organized sport with institutionally defined rules.

Furthermore, not many professions provide the intense rewards of playing football and winning championships. Several players claimed they could not take some types of work that came their way after playing football, while others expressed their addiction to seeking emotional highs in their new professions.

CHAPTER 3: TRANSITIONING INTO FOOTBALL AND ITS OPPORTUNITIES

To understand the transitions in and out of professional football, we must take a look at the typical career path of a NFL player from the beginning as a young child through the final phase of their football career, which is transitioning out of the NFL. I had such a journey and watched others along that path as they also went through the process of entering and exiting the NFL.

A child with a dream to be a professional football player begins what becomes a life-changing journey. He joins a Pop Warner football league for children ages five to 13. I started playing Pop Warner when I was in the fourth grade. I can still remember how big my shoulder pads and helmet were and how much I loved to wear them. I didn't want to take them off. It was fun to play football. It was just a game. Everybody that signed up for the league made the team. Everyone played no matter how tall, short, skinny or fat they were. All the kids were friends and just wanted to be there to have a good time. There were about six plays that the team practiced. The coaches—father of some of the players—told the kids where to be, and the kids were busy learning the basics. Some of those fathers may have played in high school, but none of them had any college-playing experience. They were all volunteers and did not get paid to coach. Everyone was there for the love of the game.

I played Pop Warner for three years. After Pop Warner ball, I joined the middle school football team. My middle school had three feeder elementary schools, so the opportunity to meet new football friends and compete with them for playing time grew. For the first time in my football experience, getting on the teams required effort from the players. There still weren't any cuts, so if you went out for the team, did your conditioning, did what the coach said, and had passing grades, you were on the team, but it was a bigger personal commitment than Pop Warner ball. Practices were two hours each weeknight right after school and would end with some form of conditioning. Conditioning meant running back and forth across the field many times until the coaches gave the team permission to stop. There were at least 25 plays, but there was no playbook to study. The coaches were teachers who may have played in high school or possibly some college. The kids played for fun and to prepare themselves for high school football. They also loved the attention that being on the team gave them—attention from classmates, teachers and family members that gave them a sense of self importance. This was the start of the building of their football ego.

In high school, the fame of being a football player brought the attention of girls, scholarship opportunities and better summer job opportunities. In

college, it brought even more attention from coeds. It provided contacts for connections with alumni and money from boosters. I could travel, had access to girls that could take me out of town and access to cars. It provided help in the classroom as teachers gave me more opportunities. Some teachers did not like it, but the majority did. Most teachers and staff wanted to see a talented student-athlete graduate from high school and then go on to college. Students were willing to help with classroom assignments and offered assistance as tutors. There were even students in the class asking me if I needed help with a project, or if I wanted to be a part of the smart kids' group.

The transition to high school football meant more commitment to the game and the team. The players were developing physically into men. The school team was comprised of guys from the western part of the county, including those I played with in middle school. The population of the entire county was about 80,000 people. There were three high schools in Craven County, North Carolina, where I was born and raised. The elite "being chosen to play" feeling grew as did the desire to dedicate myself to football. The sport was giving me feelings of pride in doing well, the sense of camaraderie and togetherness from my teammates, and the primal joy of hitting other people without really hurting anyone. I started on the junior varsity (JV) team, which consisted mostly of freshmen and sophomores. Juniors and seniors played on the varsity team. When the varsity team went to the play-offs, a select group of sophomores was able to travel with the varsity, suit up and practice those couple extra weeks. This was just to see how some sophomores stacked up against the upper-classmen, but it was an honor to be chosen and guys would work hard to be a part of that select group.

The move from JV to varsity prompted some of the guys to quit because the time commitment and academic standings were more than they could or wanted to handle. Practices were harder and longer, lasting up to three hours every afternoon with conditioning and films of the opposing teams. The scout team watched film of the opposing team and then during practice would run the opposing team's plays against their own team. The playbook contained about 25 to 50 plays that needed to be memorized—this was beyond school and homework. My commitment to football continued to grow.

Conditioning was more intensive too. Weight training/strength training became part of the regimen mainly because guys' bodies were starting to change into adults. Coaches emphasized perseverance, passion and purpose for the game. Conversations in the locker room were about college scouts and coaches that would be visiting. The coaches would notify the team when the scouts would be on campus so players could go and say hello. If you did well in school and played well, there was a chance that you could be awarded an athletic scholarship from a college or university. Some guys just wanted to

play to be with their friends and wear their jersey to school on Fridays. Not all had hopes of getting a scholarship or playing college ball. Those guys did not get the same attention as the guys who were dedicated to the game. The need for attention fueled those that did their best for the game.

High school football provided the opportunity to pursue a college scholarship. People would be talking about scholarships and who the best players were. There were conversations about kids on other teams and who was being recruited. We knew who was the top recruit in the state. We all knew who were the best wide receiver and best quarterback. You could be playing teams about five hours away from where you went to school, but you knew if there were good players on the team.

Having your name mentioned in rumors or in the local newspaper as attending a university was looked upon as something great, a status symbol. The more popular you were on the field, the more popular you were with your peers as well as the teachers. High school football players received a good deal of help with homework. Teachers, parents and counselors did not want to be the one that failed a player with great athletic prowess, so they had someone tutor those athletes. Those who were dedicated to football had hopes for college and positive futures. Life changed because scholarships were involved and they were a ticket out of whatever small town or urban environment in which the player lived. Many of the guys came from socioeconomically deprived areas, and if they did not get a scholarship, it looked as though they would be stuck in their neighborhood for the rest of their life. Many of them chose to go into the military as another "ticket out." Scholarships also brought the positive attention of family members, who saw the potential of this player as a way of helping their own situation.

Collegiate Ball

After high school, I went to junior college for two years because my SAT scores were not high enough, and I was not academically qualified or prepared to go to a university. My family and friends were proud of me because I was continuing my education. My high school coaches were happy but did not really know how far I might go. My motivation to go to junior college was to work on my academic eligibility and my chance to fulfill my dream to play in the National Football League. Junior college was not a destination for me; it was a stop along the way to getting into a Division I college. It was a rest area on my journey, but I could not rest there. I rolled out my map of goals and made plans on how to get to my destination.

The junior college I attended had a rich football tradition. During my years there, about three of my teammates went on to play in the pros. Junior

college football was another step up in my commitment to the game. There was much more time dedicated to studying plays and your opponent, and I spent more time with my coaches and teammates than with my regular classmates. There also were cuts for this team. Roughly 130 to 140 guys tried out, but only 80 made the team. This was the first time I experienced the pressure of having to be good enough athletically to make the team.

The geographic area from which my junior college teammates came from expanded as well. There were guys from South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and the metro-Atlanta area, and they all had the same dream: to get academically eligible and athletically developed so they could transfer to a four-year institution. So during summer practice, players were building their athletic skills, all in the hope of making the team.

Players were being scouted by Division I teams during their freshman and sophomore years of junior college. Their chances all depended on their athletic ability and academic status. Did they have the proper GPA? If they had that and just missed on their SAT scores, they could go to a junior college for one year. I had to graduate with an associate degree to be eligible for a Division I school.

Classroom sizes in junior college were basically the same as in high school—30 to 35 per class. If you needed a tutor, you found one on your own. You asked one of your classmates to help you work on a project. The teachers did not do anything special to help you. I roomed with a football player, but the school did not have a dorm specifically for athletes. There were four dorms for male students, and student athletes lived in all of them.

Practices were 2.5 to 3 hours long, followed by 45 minutes of conditioning. There were about 100 plays in the playbook. This deepened my commitment to my future and my dreams. My athletic identity was growing as well. The coaches had coached players who went on to Division I programs and had played in the NFL, so they knew what they were doing. It was great to be compared positively to someone. My coaches told me that I was like Jason Fonville when he played there. They would tell me that Jason was a hell of a player who went on to East Carolina University (ECU) and played in the USFL and that I was as good a linebacker as he was or maybe better. I was All-American at my junior college. I was the top defensive player on the East Coast. Many schools made scholarship offers, but I chose to go to ECU because it seemed like a great fit, and the distance from my hometown really appealed to me. My parents and friends were excited because they had the chance to watch me perform on Saturdays. About 30 family members came to each Saturday home game.

When I went to ECU, a Division I school, the student athletes came from up and down the East Coast. Some of my teammates came from prep schools

and junior colleges. Some guys were there for six years. I had teammates from Florida to New Jersey. The recruiting base of ECU, from which they targeted players, was 300 miles or closer to campus. There were 85 players on the team and only about 40 may have been from North Carolina. There were no try-outs; you had to be selected. Making the team was by invitation only and included one or two walk-ons per year. The coaches brought in 25 to 35 junior college and freshmen each year. The ethnicity of this team was significantly different than any of the previous teams I had played on. There were many more players of color. I also noticed that my teammates' bodies were bigger and stronger than I had seen in high school and junior college. They had all made personal commitments to this game. There were significantly more coaches as well. In junior college, we had five coaches; ECU had 15 to 20, with an academic support staff. They had more people in the academic house than the entire coaching staff in junior college.

It also was clear that football was more specialized at this level. After arriving on campus, when having conversations in the cafeteria with players, I would ask what position they played. They would say they played linebacker on passing situations, or they would say that they had played linebacker but primarily on running downs. In junior college, if you were a linebacker, you played all of it, any type of play. There were guys who were running backs in high school or junior college, but they did not play those positions at the university. They may have just returned kicks. They couldn't complain; they simply had to work harder to get the position that they dreamed of playing. In all the previous levels I had played, the coaches put the ball in the hands of the best player on the team, no matter the play. At the university, they had a larger pool of very talented people. They could put the ball in the hands of many different people.

Academically, in comparison to junior college where I stood in lines to register for classes and talk to counselors to find out what classes I should take and which ones were available, ECU gave me my schedule with professors and times already chosen and a map to get to class. This practice is very common in collegiate sports.

"The assistant coach in charge of academics enrolled players into their college, their major, and their classes. He was responsible for making sure they were taking courses that fulfilled their distribution as well as major requirements and he took care of the mechanics of enrolling them in classes. The players, uninvolved in academic decision-making...did not worry that these academic decisions were being made for them, or that they did not have to process their own academic paperwork; they took it for granted that this was the way

things were” (Adler & Adler, 1991).

My first semester was filled with general college courses, just basic things because I had not chosen a major yet. They also filled my schedule with other classes that did not transfer from my junior college. There were about 12 hours (one semester of my junior college work) that did not transfer. The university gave me three years to get two years’ worth of classes completed, even though I only had two years of athletic eligibility to play for the team. Football players had to be done with class by 2:00 p.m. If there was a class or lab that took place at 3:30, 5:30 or 6:30, you were not allowed to take it. The football staff took care of all of the scheduling. Adding an extra year of academic eligibility was designed to give players the chance to take late-afternoon or evening courses that they had previously been unable to attend.

When I went to class, I saw many of my teammates there. These classes were much more difficult than junior college classes, and the class size was much bigger. It was a little intimidating. I had micro- and macro-biology and physics with more than 200 students in the class. I was used to 30 people and, in some instances, as few as 18.

At ECU there were about 20 dorms. All of the male athletes lived in a dorm called Scott Hall. It was not a coed dorm. Football players lived in one wing of Scott Hall, and the rest of the dorm was a mix of basketball, baseball, swimming, soccer and track athletes. Football players’ rooms were better than those for the other athletes and much better than rooms on the rest of campus. The football wing was better than most campuses’ honors dorms. It was almost hotel-like, including access to the football-players-only cafeteria, which was only 20 yards away from the rooms. Beds were full-sized. There were no bunk beds. Our dorms had carpeting and a full bathroom or, at the minimum, a sink with a shared shower within a suite of four bedrooms. Back then, there were no cell phones, but the football players all had land-line phones in their rooms. They had access to colored televisions, and if they did not personally own a TV, they could check one out as well as a VCR. These benefits built up the egos of the football players. It made them feel privileged. It gave them a sense of togetherness and made them work even harder to stay in this elite group. Additionally, there was a good deal of security for the team while in the dorm. I was not always sure that was a perk, but looking back, I would say that with the players’ heightened need and desire for attention from anyone—including the coeds—the security was probably a good thing.

In college I did not pledge any fraternities, but some teammates did. It was tough for them to manage the football schedule, school, fraternity activities and a social scene that involved a steady stream of coeds coming through the dorms. They were disposable but helpful with homework.

Some guys on the football team talked about the importance of getting an education and getting a degree. Others were going through the motions of going to school. It was clear that their major was football, and if it wasn't for football or sports, they wouldn't have gone to college. There were NFL scouts, pro personnel, and front office personnel such as the general manager, vice president for football operations or head coaches at the ECU practices. They had access to the practice field, and athletes saw them around campus. It was common to see at practice or talking with the coaches someone in red and black from the Atlanta Falcons or in silver and blue from the Dallas Cowboys. That was very normal and it changed the way players played in practice because they wanted to impress. This made the dream to be in the NFL so much more real and within reach. This was something that each of the players who ever dreamed of playing in the NFL took very seriously.

Conditioning was one of the keys to becoming better. The strength and conditioning staff at ECU was larger than my entire high school and junior college coaching staffs put together. It was the conditioning coaches' job to get players bigger, faster and stronger. This was taken very seriously. The conditioning coaches spent more time with the players on a daily basis than any other coach on the staff. Football players spent three hours on the field for practice and football-related activities with various coaches. There were about 250 to 500 plays to study and a playbook. Then another two hours were set aside for strength and conditioning, five days a week, followed by film studying for another two hours a day.

At the collegiate level, you encounter many athletes from single-parent homes. Many have not had a father figure in their lives, and they are asked by big-time programs to sell out for the program and university and to give that institution and those coaches complete trust. That can be difficult for some young men who have learned not to trust. Sometimes one of the initial things coaches do is inform these athletes what over achievement and over achievers are. It is not inherited. You are not necessarily predestined to be like your father. Character flaws don't have to be passed down. Although success cannot be bought, it does not come cheap. You must pay the price for preparation. Your investment must be branded into your character, and your character is your foundation. Your character is reinforced as a football player, someone who will give his all, his blood, sweat, tears, and soul to this game. Former Nebraska coach Tom Osborn alluded to how coaches feel about their players in his book, *Faith in the Game*, (p. 30):

"I believe that players who truly are intent on honoring God with their lives and with their play make a difference. The spiritual atmosphere on our team, although not perfect, was generally conducive to mutual respect and self-sacrifice. It

certainly enhanced the chemistry of our team...Amos Alonzo Stagg, one of the most respected football coaches of all time, said: 'You must love your boys to get the most out of them and do the most for them. I have worked with boys whom I haven't admired, but have loved them just the same. Love has dominated my coaching career, as I am sure it has and always will that of many other coaches and teachers.'"

It was the coach's job to build the players into men and into a team. Each coach at each level of the game had an impact on each player's life.

In college, the football players had meetings, seminars, presentations and practices to attend. There was not much down time. The coaches wanted the players in both sessions of summer school. Football started in mid-May and ran through December. Spring training ran February through April. In January and half of May, the players got a little time off. June and July consisted of working out, running and conditioning. So football was pretty much year-round. I would get to the stadium around 2:00 p.m. each day and leave after study hall around 9:00 p.m. The staff had dinner for the players at the training table. Players would eat after practice and then go right to study hall. There was not much social time for the athletes. At least seven waking hours were dedicated to football each day, and that does not include living with football players, so the majority of the conversations were football related, competition related and football-ego boosting.

"... [T]heir living situation (in athletic housing), their relations to authority (their coaches replaced their parents), their social identities (they were college athletes instead of high school students or teenagers), and their social milieu (they were primarily surrounded by other student-athletes) all served to accentuate the centrality of the athletic role and to change their self-conceptions" (Adler and Adler, p. 125).

All of the conditioning, practicing, playing and preparation at the university built up to April of your senior year with the NFL draft. Senior players' season had ended the previous November. The athletes came back to the university for spring semester and worked out on their own or with a trainer. During January, February and March, senior players flew around the country to different NFL teams to take physicals and psychological tests like the Wonderlic Cognitive Ability Test to see if they had what it took to make a team. The NFL Combine, part track meet and part fitness test, took place in February, when the NFL brought the top 350 athletes entering the draft to Indianapolis. I did not get selected to go to the Combine, but a couple of players on my team went. When I should have been in my spring semester

classes, I was conditioning and trying to push myself physically to prepare for NFL mini-camps and training camps. I continued to dedicate myself to my athletic dream of being a professional football player. I was too engulfed in my role as a football player to consider my academic role.

If playing in the NFL wasn't your dream, ECU had resources to help you develop from an academic standpoint. But if it was a dream of yours, ECU had the system with pro scouts coming through and everything in place to help an athlete develop into a pro football player. Agents mailed you materials at the beginning of your senior year. They had a list—drawn from their contacts with scouts and various NFL personnel—of players they considered had the ability to have a chance of making an NFL team. The agents were similar to the scouts making decisions as to who would go to college.

Because of this, when an agent “chose you,” it made the player feel important. Players felt agents were their friends and advisors.

Making It into the NFL

I went to the Atlanta Falcons' training camp because I did not get drafted. The Falcons were one of three or four teams to call right after the draft to sign me as a free agent. I looked at all the opportunities and rosters with my agent, and we chose the team that we felt I had the best chance to make. I was one of the last players to be cut by the Falcons during camp. It was devastating. My family was really hurting for me. They knew how much time I put into the sport and my development. I was then drafted into NFL Europe because the Falcons had recommended me. Basically, if a team cuts you but feels you have potential, they send you to NFL Europe which is similar to Major League Baseball's farm system. My family was happy that I had another opportunity. They knew it wasn't the big time, but if I played well, there was an outside chance that I would get another shot to make the NFL. They had dreams of seeing me play in the NFL and, for some, those dreams may have also included how they could personally benefit from me as well. I went to NFL Europe at the end of January 1992 and played through April. I had a great season leading the team and the entire league in tackles.

Half the coaches in NFL Europe had played in the pros. All of them played college, and some were in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. I gained knowledge from the best who had ever played, people I aspired to be like. In NFL Europe, there was no need for a scouting list because all of the game tapes were circulated throughout the NFL. It was their league and they had access to all facilities, practices and locker rooms. Ted Thompson, director of pro personnel for the Green Bay Packers, came to scout me and recommended me to Ron Wolf, the Packers' general manager. After my last NFL Europe

game, I came out of the locker room, and Ted Thompson was standing there with a colleague; they talked about dates and times when I could fly to Green Bay to take a physical, meet coaches, and discuss the idea of joining the team. A total of three teams wanted me to visit their facilities, take physicals and try out. My agent and I decided that the best place for me to go was the Green Bay Packers. My family was very happy. They did not know what this meant fully, what it meant to have me playing in the NFL or where Green Bay, Wisconsin, was. It was all uncharted territory. No one in my family had gotten this far.

On June 2, 1992, I signed with the Green Bay Packers and played there for eight years. Mini-camps started on June 15th. During those mini-camps, rookies were trying to get acclimated to the playbooks and the offense and defenses that the pro teams were using. Things moved really fast. There also was a big age disparity among the teammates. When I was in college, there was a four-to-five-year age difference, but in the NFL, there were guys 12 to 15 years older than I—some were more than 15 years older. They smoked cigarettes in the locker room. My grandma, someone who did not even like sports, had told me that athletes don't smoke cigarettes. I was in a cultural shock. Some guys smoked cigars, but looking back, I think it was for intimidation. It was a status symbol to smoke a cigar because blacks in the South chewed tobacco or dipped snuff, but growing up, I never knew or saw anyone from my neighborhood smoke a Cuban cigar. I did not even know why a Cuban cigar was different from any other cigar. Smoking also reinforced their football ego and how self-important each of these seasoned players felt. They wanted to be sure the rookies understood how important they were as well.

In the NFL, there were lots of women, and teammates competed to see who could get the most or the best. There was money, cars, the media spotlight, access to local and national politicians, access to people of influence from all ethnic groups, and access to people from all social classes.

Business Opportunities and Networking

As a professional football player in the NFL, all kinds of business opportunities abound. Everyone wants a piece of the player. His alma mater sends letters asking when he will come back. They give him special access to the locker room and ask him to speak to the team. They put him at dinner tables with trustees and distinguished alumni. He is in business networking circles because of his status as an NFL player. Whether or not he capitalizes on those unique opportunities with influential individuals is up to him and his agent, the gate keeper. The agent mulls through the proposals from family

members and people whom the player has come in contact with over the years. People from financial groups or local banks want to be introduced to the player because they probably think he wants to buy his mom a car, or they want him to deposit his money with them. Business people in the city want to build relationships with him as a means of promoting their own business. Politicians want to have their picture taken with him and want a donation. Women want to date him because they think he will provide for them financially.

Because so much is thrown at the player at a fairly young age, it is hard not to get caught up in the glory and adoration. If most players knew the importance of networking and relationship building, they would come away from those events and meetings with more knowledge about things outside of football. Even though people want to talk about football and get a glimpse of the life of an NFL player, the player should go into the situation thinking, "I'm going to meet some very influential people. How can I get to know them better, and how will these opportunities help me and my family in the future?"

The NFL has the NFL Players Association but no social networks while a player is in the league. His teammates are part of his social network, as are his church and family members. Some players had fraternity brothers if they pledged a fraternity in college.

After the NFL, a player's social networks depend on how fully he was engulfed with the game. Again, some players can lean on fraternity organizations. There are still former teammates or NFL players who attend various league events. Beyond that, a player's church, family members and university alumni association are his main social networks until he works through his transition from the NFL into another occupation.

My roommate in Green Bay, Martin Jacobs, went to Southern University, and I knew more about his school's trustees than he did. I had begun to build relationships with the board members of my alma mater, ECU, and through them I was introduced to trustees at other peer institutions within the 17-campus University of North Carolina system. Those relationships helped me in my life after football. Martin, I believe, was engulfed in the glorified self. I should not have known the people in his university's most influential circles better than he did, even though the people in most North Carolina circles knew each other and had connections to one another.

College is the place where athletes are supposed to obtain the proper training to pursue a career outside of sport. Those opportunities are there, but athletes do not always seize them. The NCAA-NFL Advisory Committee tries to reach NFL players who have not expressed an interest in completing their college degrees by creating degree-completion opportunities. The committee also established a continuing education program for players to get their

master's degrees and to provide internships in marketing, such as television boot camp, where players can learn how to be a sportscaster.

Additionally, through its player development program, the NFL works on improving life skills by offering courses dealing with friends/family, relationship difficulties, financial pressures and domestic violence. The players were initially surveyed to find out what they were interested in learning about, and they expressed interest in women and relationships (fidelity, violence, divorce, child custody issues), financial pressures (expectations of others, friends/family), team pressures (coaches, management), drugs and alcohol.

Dreams Realized, Deferred and Denied

In American society, we are taught to value and embrace a sense of freedom, opportunity, hard work, discipline, fairness, humanity and love of country. While these ideals are important and central to every aspect of our lives and who we all are, there have been times in which we and our country have fallen short of those objectives. And for those who have found themselves locked out by society, their seasons of discontent lead to protest, both violent and non-violent. On average, playing careers in the National Football League last 3.5 years. Former players experience major life changes, and this role transition often presents stressful situations that create a demand for adjustment (Wheaton, 1990). High-performance athletes are confronted with a wide range of psychological, interpersonal and financial adjustments when their careers end (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). One study notes that moderate to severe depressive symptoms among retired NFL players are similar to those found in the general population but are higher when compared to younger, active player populations (Schwent et. al., 2007).

As a former NFL player, I am concerned by the numerous problems experienced by retired players. While players today make more money, graduate from college at a higher rate than those in the past, and are provided more services by the NFL Players Association, past and present anecdotal accounts indicate that the benefits on the front end have not translated into the quality of life hoped for at the end of a career. But the future is often not on the radar when one begins in the NFL.

At the start of training camp, there were 85 players that could be under contract, but by the opening day of the season, teams had to cut down to their final roster of 53 players. These players were from all over the country. I met guys whose hometowns included places such as Seattle, Washington; Flint, Michigan; Fort Myers, Florida; and Las Vegas, Nevada. I had not ever been exposed to people with such varying backgrounds. I was only accustomed to

people from my area of the United States. I did not know that they played football in Compton. I did not know they had players like that. I met some guys born in Jamaica who had moved to the States to attend college. So when they asked where I was from, no one had heard of where I came from. In North Carolina, my hometown used to be the state capital, but the guy from Seattle only thought he heard of Raleigh, North Carolina but never New Bern, North Carolina. I was blown away. I did not even know that Detroit had African Americans. When I found out that the percentage of African Americans in Detroit was 81 compared to only 14 percent where I grew up, I was taken aback. At that time I knew that what I was embarking on was truly special. It was life changing. I was among the best of the best. Not just in Craven County, not just in North Carolina, or on the East Coast, but I was surrounded by the best players from around the world.

I was still surprised at how many African Americans were on the team and how few African Americans were on the coaching staff. The team was about 60 percent African American but only four percent of the coaching staff was black.

My experiences of meeting new teammates and having to live, practice, battle, learn and spend numerous hours with them in intimate settings such as a locker room, expanded my ability to get along with anyone. I may not have chosen some of my teammates as friends, but when it came to game day, we needed to work together to accomplish our goal. I learned how to make fast friendships but also how to say good-bye to good friends just as quickly.

Many guys get cut early; no one is exempt. Rookies and veterans get cut. Some get cut because athletically they just couldn't make it. Some of the cuts were made from a financial standpoint. For example, the team might be getting the same production out of Player A, who is 23 years old and making \$175,000, compared to Player B, who is 29 and makes \$400,000. So the team goes with Player A. Some get cut because they cannot show their skill sets due to nagging injuries. If the organization does not have money invested in a player, it does not have time to wait for him.

Football became a 24/7, full-role engulfment for me. There was no computer lab to go to, no classes or study halls to attend. A player drops the "student" part from student-athlete and adds "professional"—and that's what he then is. Then it becomes a quid pro quo: he makes plays, he gets paid. If he dedicates himself to football and has the talent to be among the best, then he will be rewarded with a position on the team, a handsome salary, and the fame and adoration that goes along with being a professional football player and achieving the "American dream."

In my experience, players went to work at the stadium around 7:15 a.m. for the first meeting and worked until 5:00 p.m. They saw doctors and

trainers, participated in strength and conditioning activities, studied film, reviewed their playbook, practiced from 11:00 to 11:45 on the field, and then ate lunch at noon. The second practice started at 1:45 and would go until 3:45, after which I would shower, then studied film to watch what I did in practice so I could make corrections. Film study lasted an hour or a little longer. Then I had personal time.

I witnessed how, for most players, their passion was football. It was hard to develop a love or passion for anything else. That said, some players got married. I knew some players who got married because they thought the coaches would look more favorably on them for supporting a family. These same guys never stopped seeing multiple girlfriends because they never developed an understanding of what it meant to love another individual as much as they loved themselves and football. To them, it was perfectly normal to give themselves physically but never emotionally to these women. These same players were shocked when their wives filed for divorce.

Beyond relationships, there were injuries to be handled. If a player pulled a hamstring and missed a week in training camp, it was like missing two years of experience. So, if he was sitting out for a pulled hamstring or nagging injuries and was limited in his ability to practice and play in pre-season games, there was a good chance he wouldn't make the team. He couldn't make the club in the tub. I remember how, during my first five years, I was so scared to miss a day of practice, and during that time, I never missed a single practice or took a day off. In the years to follow, any days I missed were due to being on the physically unable to perform list (PUP) or injured reserve (IR).

When someone left the team because they were injured, he couldn't simply be cut. There were workman's compensation issues, and he would have to work out a settlement because of injury. The team would have to buy that player out of his contract. This happened all the time because guys were always getting injured. Injuries were not always career ending, but they were severe enough that the players did not have the opportunities to showcase their talents to the coaches and the front office. Personally, I witnessed two career-ending injuries (fictitious names of players and teams are used here). One was a neck injury that Donavon Berry suffered in Crystal Stadium. He had been on track to be a future Hall of Famer, but he only played seven years as a result of the injury. He never really got a chance to play with NFL stand-out Benjamin Tate. The second career-ending injury I witnessed was when Darryl Gatlin was hurt in 1993 against the San Antonio Kings. Darryl came back but left football because he feared being paralyzed. He had surgery, but he wasn't the same, so he retired. That's when I started asking questions about Lloyds of London Insurance. I asked players in the locker room and my agent to look into the premiums, which were about \$100,000 a year. Many guys did not get

the insurance because most injuries don't qualify for it, including knee, shoulder, ankle, Achilles, or elbow injuries that are not career-ending injuries. As a result, I did not purchase it. Very few guys had it. It all depended on who you were. The organization would take out insurance on certain high-profile players with bigger contracts like James Foye, Benjamin Tate and Alfred Bond.

Injuries were one challenge, but there also was the possibility of being traded. It wasn't like being cut. Sometimes it was better. You may be on a team where there are many players in your position. If you got traded to a team that wasn't as deep in that position, it gave the player more field time. Some players go on to do very well on another team.

The unspoken fear was being cut—which could happen at any time. In my experience, most of the cuts happened during training camp. It was the mandatory time to cut the size of the team. But players could be cut at any time, including during the season or during mini-camps. In my case, it came after eight years with the Packers and a Super Bowl win. It was hard leaving the team. I hurt my shoulder and had just signed a big deal. There was a coaching change and it was just as simple as that. I was told, "You are out." Ted Thompson and Coach Mike Holmgren asked me to go out to Seattle with them, and I took their offer; however, I felt like a part of me had died when my tenure as a player with the Packers came to an end.

A part of me did die. It was very sad because for eight years I saw a bunch of other players get that tap on the shoulder. When I got tapped on the shoulder, it was tough. I was down, but I still went to Seattle. I healed during the off-season so when training camp came around, I was healthy. I played in Seattle with Coach Holmgren for one year. The team and city culture in Seattle were totally different than in Green Bay. They did not have the tradition and the history. The Packers were deep in both tradition and history. Seattle was not a winning team at the time. In its 30-year history, it may have had three winning seasons and perhaps one play-off victory; Coach Holmgren was inheriting a major task. I signed a one-year deal with Seattle.

Looking back, I might have had five drinks all season in Seattle and that was not typical for me. I would have five drinks in one night out with the guys in Green Bay. I wasn't a guy that drank when things got bad. In Green Bay, I drank when things were good. My lack of drinking in Seattle did not mean I had a rotten season.

In fact, I had a pretty good season. I was second on the team in tackles. Now though, when I look back, that was the start of my depression because I could see the handwriting on the wall that my career was coming to a close. Something that I had been involved with for 23 of my 32 years was coming to an end, and it was a very sad time. I went from being a starter (I started all 16

games in Seattle) to not playing ever again. When I went back to North Carolina at the end of the season, I did not get any calls from anyone. Seattle did not want to bring me back, and nobody else wanted my services. That was it. No one would contact me after that. I would call my agent to find out if he had heard anything, but there was nothing. I was isolated. My agent stopped calling, and this was a guy who I thought was my friend, my financial advisor, my life coach. I had spoken to him on the phone three to four times a day since I signed with him out of college. I was forced to face a hard reality that this guy really wasn't my friend. He was just a guy doing his job and earning his paycheck.

I did not see my family much. I would see them maybe once a week. So there wasn't a whole lot of support. To get support, I would go to church. I tried to keep myself as busy as possible with bible study on Wednesday and church on Sunday. I did that for the second year out of the game. The first year I drank. Then I cleansed my system and did not drink anything for six months. I fasted and prayed for three months. I wanted to give my body a break. It was very hard. Then I started to realize the importance that one young lady was having in my life. Her name was Tunisia. I felt like I had gotten a new purpose in life. The purpose that I thought I had, the only purpose I had ever known, was no longer. Football was gone. I turned my focus to education and challenging myself to getting my master's degree. I turned my focus to my work. In 2003, I went to ECU to help with recruiting and that is when I got back into football. So about two years after having been away from the game, I went right back into it at a different level.

Role Engulfment

Why is it so hard for players to "move on" when their playing days are done? How is football so much different from any other professional sport?

For one thing, there is no outlet after football that gives a player the opportunity to "relive" his glory days. Professional baseball players can join a community league just about anywhere. There are softball leagues for 80-year-old players that give them the opportunity to utilize their knowledge and skills even if their bodies aren't capable of what they once had been. Baseball players also tend to have longer careers that don't do as much physical harm to their bodies. Similarly, professional basketball players can play a game of pick-up or go to an open gym session just about anywhere in their community to shoot some hoops and relive some of their glory days. In addition, their playing career lasts longer and is not as physically demanding.

Professional tennis players and golfers play games considered by many to be sports that can be played for life. Players of either of these sports also tend

to come from affluent families who can afford country club memberships that allow them to develop their skills at a young age and be trained by the best. Most of these players don't come from families with modest incomes and, therefore, don't have the family demands on their professional earnings. They don't see sport as an opportunity to "make it" or move up in the world. They also are most likely taught how to manage significant sums of money or have access to trusted individuals who could advise them how to best manage their professional earnings.

Football players give the game everything they have physically. It is the trade-off for being one of the best playing the most brutal sport in the world. They need to be physically and mentally role engulfed and that affects their ability to work toward preparing themselves for their NFL after-life. And this after-life may be marred if a player suffered an injury that has left him permanently disabled.

The period after football is made more difficult because others outside the football "community" cannot relate to what those who played for a long time experienced. Those interviewed for this study often talked about the inability of friends to relate.

Transitioning football players also discussed the difficulty of working in fields that were not highly structured but that required a spontaneity and flexibility in decision making that they were not used to after taking part for so long in an organized sport with institutionally defined rules.

Furthermore, not many professions offer the intense rewards of playing football and winning championships. Some former players claim they could not take some types of work that came their way after playing football, while others expressed their addiction to seeking emotional highs in their new professions.

CHAPTER 5: LIFE AFTER THE NFL

On average, a player in the NFL experiences retirement from sport after 3.5 years. That figure, however, is misleading because very often, undrafted free agents and players selected in the late rounds of the draft typically play just a couple of years or never make the opening day roster. Consequently, they never get a chance to get their base salary.

In April 1991, I signed with the Atlanta Falcons as an undrafted free agent. My signing bonus was \$15,000 and my base salary was \$125,000. I attended three mini-camps, lasting one week each, and six weeks of training camp. I was paid \$750 a week for camps. I was released by the Falcons after the last week of training camp and never saw the \$125,000 because I failed to make the team's opening day roster. While I was fortunate to join NFL Europe in January 1992, most players never get another shot. During camps, the teams start with 85 players, and 33 of those guys get cut every year by each of the 32 NFL teams—a total of 1,024 players. The majority of those guys have not played 3.5 years. My experience with the Falcons happens to probably about 80 percent of the guys trying to break into the NFL. Those players who are fortunate to make the team roster do not realize that it is just a matter of time before they get that tap on the shoulder and hear those dreaded words, "The coach wants to see you, and please bring your playbook."

The majority of NFL players leave the game involuntarily due to injury or being deselected. When a player is deselected, he is either released from the team or is not called back for another season after his contract has expired. Most players attempt to extend their time in the NFL, thinking that there are great benefits to staying in the game (Hearle, 1975; McPherson, 1980; Mihovilovic, 1968). But Taylor & Ogilvie (1994, 2001) argue that it is sometimes beneficial for a player to leave voluntarily since doing so often gives a sense of control and suggests he is planning his next step. Voluntary retirement saves the athlete from dealing with the trauma of being unexpectedly separated from his passion.

Athletes sometimes choose to retire for various reasons, ranging from social to psychological ones (Wleman De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom and Annerel, 1993). In one study, athletes who participated in individual sports such as golf and tennis reported that monetary concerns were their main reason for leaving after experiencing less success and yet still leading a costly lifestyle (McPherson, 1980). Aware that financial difficulties were on the horizon, they could set their sights on other professions.

Voluntary retirement places a large amount of control and self-consciousness in the hand of the athlete, making that form of role change difficult but not sudden and completely undesirable. Interestingly enough,

voluntary retirement seems to occur much less within the ranks of professional football players. There may be a number of reasons for this relative low frequency of voluntary exits, but this study focuses on the difficulty of disengaging from sport, given that athletes who were so immersed in sport culture might seem intimidated by life after sport.

Involuntary retirement or forced exit happens when an athlete becomes injured, reaches an age that makes him less capable during games or is deselected (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). It often contributes to a higher risk of trauma in the period following career termination from sport since athletes, for a prolonged period of time, might feel the impact of not having control over their life and career decisions. They must deal with a sudden change of identity and may not be able to find a similar role in the field in which they placed so much effort. Individuals fired from positions in other fields, for example, might switch companies or locations, but athletes that are cut and not picked up by another team have few options and, thus, experience a dramatic shift in identity.

Research estimates that 14 to 46 percent of athletes retire from sport due to injury (Pitts & Popovich, 1994; Allison & Meyer, 1988; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Mihovilovic, 1968). Injuries are perhaps the most dramatic example of involuntary exit in that they often result in serious distress manifested in depression, substance abuse and attempted suicide (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Retirement due to injury may be difficult because of the suddenness of the injury itself. An athlete may not be prepared for transition given that he never imagined living with any sort of disability (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Even if the possibility of being terminated due to injury might be somewhat predictable, the fact that some athletes continue participating in sport demonstrates a high instance of denial, which in individual cases can stem from a lack of time planning for another career. Career-ending injuries may cause athletes to experience fear, anxiety and isolation (Rotella & Heymann 1984). Kleiber, Greendorfer, Blinde and Samdahl (1987) indicate that retired collegiate football and basketball players who left their professions due to career-ending injuries had significantly lower life satisfaction scores than athletes who did not.

Age is also reported to be one of the main causes of athletic retirements (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and fits within the category of involuntary retirement. As athletes become older, they lose their ability to train and compete at the same level (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). It has been suggested that aging athletes experience psychological stress while remaining in sport since they may not be treated in the same way by fans, management, media and even other athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Overpriced veteran players are not exempt from being terminated or having to restructure their contracts

to fit under the team's salary cap. Thus, some athletes leave without feeling confident about their career experience and simultaneously find themselves behind their peers when it comes to pursuing a second occupation.

The Lives of Ex-Players

The year or two after a player is deselected is depressing because he feels rejected. Everybody always called you back before. Now teams don't call back. When he was in high school or at junior college, the four-year universities were recruiting him. If he left a message for someone, they were calling back before he turned the corner in his house. When I was in NFL Europe and being recruited by NFL teams, representatives immediately returned my calls. After a player is deselected and no one is calling, it is so emotionally draining and hard.

After playing eight years with the Packers, and with four years left on my contract, I was told not to report to camp for the upcoming season. I still wanted to play the game and still believed that I could perform at a high level. I was picked up by the Seattle Seahawks for my ninth and final year in the NFL. My contract with the Seahawks was a one-year contract. I had hoped to sign on with them the following year; however, my phone never rang. Players who are deselected and not getting called back work out because that is the only time and place where, for a few hours a day, they are in their element and are able to get their mind off the business and the rejection they think about constantly. I worked out for two years with the hope of keeping in shape and getting called back. After my first year of being out of football, I just knew the next year would be *the* year. I was in denial. I lost confidence and I was out of my element when that call never came. I felt like I had nobody to talk to who understood what I was going through.

Could I call an old playing buddy who had been out of the league for a few years for support? No; a player does not call another player who has been deselected because of embarrassment and vulnerability. Prior to that moment, the player had been great at everything. He was a warrior, a hero, a victor, and now—what is he? He cannot let people know that he is weak. So, he keeps all that to himself and works out, trying to do things to keep himself busy mentally. Former Nebraska coach Tom Osborne discussed how the transition out of football caused confusion and despair for many of his players that went on to play professionally in the National Football League in his book, *Faith in the Game*, (pg.20):

“An extreme example of someone finding it hard to transition from the NFL to ordinary life is that of an acquaintance who had a long and successful professional career. Upon his

retirement from the NFL, he had a difficult time finding a place in the business world. Each morning he would leave his home in a business suit with his briefcase, and each evening he would return, giving every appearance to his family that things were going well. However, he was actually sitting all day long in a parked car in despair over his inability to fit into the business community. He eventually took his own life and that of his wife as well.”

Most retired guys who call me want to recapture the locker room and the good times. They want me to tell a joke. All guys miss the camaraderie. Yes, they miss the money, but some guys made a lot and they had a lot saved. Some guys even miss the practices. Their lives after football leave them fending for their own welfare.

For example, Thurman Simmons has been out of the league for nine years, and last year, he opened a restaurant; before that, he did real estate, but it took eight years to find his passion and that next job. James Foye has been done playing for about ten years, and his dealership just closed. He did not go to business school. It is one thing to take a business loss when you are playing because you have significant income to make it up; it is a totally different thing when you are not playing. When you leave the NFL, you are basically on your own. No one follows up with you. Guys get involved in high school coaching and announcing. They do not have anywhere to go or anything to do because there is no transition program upon exit. If, however, a player has someone he trusts, that person can tell him he has to move on. Then he can start that transition to being a gainfully employed coach or going to school to get those skill sets needed for another career. In the latter case, the NFL does provide a continuing education fund, which provides up to \$10,000 a year per player. But the player needs someone to push him forward, beyond the depression.

What Does the NFL Do?

Conducting the Player Development Program

The NFL has been working to better prepare players for life outside of the NFL through the league’s Player Development Program. I had the opportunity to be employed by the NFL as the Green Bay Packers director of the Player Development Program. In that role, I was trained by the NFL along with directors from other teams in the league.

As a director, I provided assistance through four initiatives:

(1) Career Internship/Professional Development Program

The goals of this program are to help players identify their personality types, traits and respective skill sets related to post- playing career options. The program is also designed to help players develop their written and verbal communication in creating resumes and learning how to network. Additionally, through internships, informational interviews and job shadowing opportunities, the program helps players become accustomed to the requirements of the job market as it exists outside of professional football.

(2) Financial Education Program

This program includes opportunities for players to apply for scholarships to attend prestigious programs at Harvard Business School, The Wharton School of Business, The Kellogg School of Management, and The Stanford Graduate School of Business. In 2007, 100 players across the league participated in this program. Of that group, 95 were current players and five were retired.

(3) Continuing Education Program

The intent of this program is to increase the league's degree completion rate by providing opportunities, advisors, tools and incentives to collegiate non-graduates who had pursued a professional football career. This program includes working with the NCAA and outside sources to evaluate what a player had accomplished while in school and what credits he needs to obtain his degree. The participation rate in continuing education programs is low by active players mainly because of the need to train year-round.

(4) Player Assistance Services

The goal of this program is to provide counseling services to players and their dependents, providing educational information about mental health issues and counseling to reduce the stigma related to seeking help. An annual life skills seminar is conducted, teaching players how to cope effectively with stress and reduce negative off-the-field conduct. Other topics discussed include dealing with friends and family, relationship difficulties, financial pressures, drugs and alcohol, and domestic violence.

Reporting Myths and Facts: Issues Surrounding Retirement

In 2006, a player exit survey (NFL, 2007) sent to 280 players was returned by only 36 showed. Results show that 69 percent of those players left the NFL without a job. In giving reasons for leaving the NFL, 33 percent were released; 28 percent left due to injury; 25 percent retired; and 14 percent left for other reasons. Making conclusions based upon these results, the NFL admitted the limitations of their sample size, but wanted to continue to

improve upon the Player Development Program.

The NFL Player Engagement website presents a ticker of information including so-called myths and facts about being a player (NFL Player Engagement, 2012):

- MYTH: 78 percent of all NFL players are divorced, bankrupt or unemployed within two years after leaving the NFL.
- FACT: NFL retirees are more likely to be currently married than comparable men in the general population and are less likely to have never been married. The divorce rates for NFL retirees (ages 30 to 49) are comparably lower to the divorce rates for the same segment of the general population (20 percent versus 26 percent).
- FACT: Financial well-being—NFL retirees have higher income than men of similar ages in the general population. The number of retirees who indicated they were “depressed at the current time” is comparably lower than the same segment of the general population....”

These “facts” seem suspect because the NFL does not disclose the methodology used for collecting the data. The data presented to me while working for the NFL made me more than suspect that the league had a poor response record when it came to surveys. The results from my interviews differ significantly from the so-called facts. For example, my data is almost evenly split between those who remained married and those who got divorced. Two informants never married while nine remained married and ten got divorced. Based on my autoethnographic knowledge, I would put the divorce rate closer to 50 percent than 20 percent.

I also question the NFL’s “facts” regarding retirees. NFL retirees need to meet certain criteria before they are eligible to be called a retiree and receive benefits; therefore, the so-called “facts” are misleading at best. Specifically, to receive retirement benefits from the NFL, one must be a vested player. To be vested, one must play a minimum of three to five credited seasons, depending on the decade in which he played. There are also stipulations for those who are disabled. A credited season is generally counted after a player has played or has been contracted to play for at least three games. Again, there are stipulations to this clause, but for generalization purposes in this study, I will work with three games and three seasons. Table 3 is recreated from the NFL retirement plan booklet and became effective August 2010 for retirement benefits commencing on and after June 1, 2006.

Table 3: Recreated Table from NFL Retirement Plan Booklet

Credited Season	Benefit Credit
Before 1982	\$250
1982 through 1992	\$255
1993 through 1994	\$265
1995 through 1996	\$315
1997	\$365
1998 through the <i>Plan Year</i> that begins prior to the expiration of the final league year (as defined in the Collective Bargaining Agreement)	\$470

Retirement benefits begin the first month after one's 55th birthday; however if a player wants to declare himself "retired" at 45 years of age, the benefit credit amounts are actuarially reduced. The average NFL career is only 3.52 seasons.

Example: If a player earns Credited Seasons for the nine years 1992 through 2000, his benefit credits add up to \$3,190 (\$255 + \$265 + \$265 + \$315 + \$315 + \$365 + \$470 + \$470 + \$470). When he reaches age 55, he will be eligible for a benefit of \$3,190 per month, payable for as long as he lives. Generally, if payment begins before or after his normal retirement date, this amount will be actuarially adjusted. If he elects an early retirement pension when reaching age 45 (this option is not available if he does not have a Credited Season prior to the 1993 Plan Year), his monthly benefit will be \$1,442. If he elects a deferred retirement pension and begins payments when reaching age 65, his monthly benefit will be \$8,355 (Bell, Rozelle, 2010).

The above is in addition to any eligible social security benefits and an annuity program that is market driven. While on average, the example makes the majority of players vested; the total dollar amount received per month during retirement sounds generous. The facts remain, however, that the average age of a player leaving the game is 28 and the average life expectancy for retired NFL players is 53 to 59 years. That leaves a player with almost 30 years between leaving the game and his ability to claim retirement benefits. If he lives to the average age of 57 for a retired player, he will only receive those benefits for a couple of years.

On average, players have a 30-year income gap to cover between their NFL career ending and being eligible for retirement benefits. Most players are

so role engulfed that they are not considering those 30 years when they are active in the sport. Many have extensive injuries and their bodies need to heal before they will be able to even begin to consider what they will pursue in their post-NFL life. For others, they have injuries that never heal, and their health insurance coverage runs out long before their bodies are in a condition to take on another career. In one case, injuries ruined a second career.

For example, Reggie Williams, a former Cincinnati Bengal and Dartmouth College graduate, played in the league for 14 years. After his retirement, he became an executive at Disney. Due to extensive injuries caused during his playing years, he had his knees operated on 17 times, which included having both knees replaced. Complications with bone infections had doctors thinking they may have to amputate his right leg, but they were able to avoid that. Nevertheless, he had to quit his job at Disney at the age of 53 because of the pain in his legs and will have to take antibiotics for the rest of his life. He was successful both on and off the field, but his injuries now have him rehabbing the right side of his body for three hours a day. He estimates that his medical expenses are around \$500,000. Most of those expenses were covered with the insurance he carried at Disney, but he still had extensive out of pocket expenses. He applied for NFL disability benefits but was notified that he was not eligible. (retiredplayers.org, 2009)

Health insurance for vested players lasts for only five years after a player is out of the league. Retired players have a class-action lawsuit against the NFL Players Association because they did not have representation during the latest NFL lockout and negotiations with active players to have their issues such as health insurance addressed. Health insurance is critical because many players who leave the game, especially after having played for an extended length of time, have some kind of injury. Rarely does a player play for ten years without getting hurt, so when he leaves the NFL, he most likely has to do some physical maintenance or rehab on injuries. While many injuries may not qualify as disabilities, they are life-long health concerns that require medical treatment. If a retired player has not found a second career with health care benefits, that player will have serious financial concerns in addition to health problems. Current players in the league have negotiated a much better health insurance plan for themselves, but that plan does not help retired players. Present disability and permanent eligibility requirements reflect the following:

“You are an active player or a vested inactive player; and you must not be receiving retirement benefits; and you have at least one credited season after 1958; and you are not vested based solely on special rules which are based on years in which an inactive player was employed in the league” (Bell,

Rozelle, 2010).

The disability plan benefits are so complex that the explanation of those benefits covers multiple pages in the retirement booklet while there is a separate booklet that outlines the supplemental disability plan. Due to the repeated concussions and health concerns of retired players related to head injuries, one of the clauses mentioned in the retirement booklet refers to the application process to obtain disability benefits. The plan includes the following:

“If your application is approved, total and permanent disability benefits will generally be paid retroactive to the first day of the month that is two months prior to the date your completed application is received by the Plan Office. However, if your application was delayed due to mental incapacity, benefits may be paid retroactively up to 36 months before your application was received” (Bell, Rozelle, 2010).

Mental incapacity has come to the forefront of disputes that retired players have with the NFL. Even the most recent NFL contract has included many more safety guidelines designed to protect the players from concussions and other injuries. It limits their practice time in pads because pads give players an increased sense of invincibility—something players in the early decades did not have. The equipment used by those players, while top of the line at the time, did not provide the protection that today’s highly engineered equipment does. With the protection that this new equipment provides, comes the ability to hit harder. Those hits, those blows are what end careers and cause permanent disabilities.

While the NFL closely tracks and treats injuries for current players, individuals who leave the game must journey through the complex world of health coverage and care on their own. The difficulty this causes for the retired or deselected player is evident in the number of support groups that have been established to aid players. These resources are all connected directly through the NFL offices and include the following:

- (1) NFL Player Care Foundation - designed to assist vested players with health care and quality of life, life insurance, spine care, joint repair, assisted living, and prescription drug benefits.
- (2) NFL Alumni Dire Need Fund - helps vested NFL players, coaches and their families with life necessities, such as mortgages, including second mortgages, car loans and rent.
- (3) The 88 Plan - If a player has loss of memory, attention, speaking, coordination, problem-solving, or shows signs of dementia, he may qualify for the 88 Plan benefit.

- (4) Bert Bell/Pete Rozelle NFL Player Retirement Plan - provides eligible NFL players with pension and disability benefits and offers survivor benefits for their family.
- (5) Gene Upshaw Player Assistance Fund - provides financial assistance to former professional and amateur players and their families in times of crisis (all of preceding: gridirongreats.org).

The Gridiron Greats Foundation site lists approximately 75 players who have helped out financially with the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund (GGAF) and explains the personal reason behind the need of each player. Additionally there is the NFLPA, which has representation from retired players, the NFL retired players' organization, a web group called Fourth and Goal Unites, and another called simply Retired Players.org.

The Retired Players Department is a division of the NFLPA. It attempts to bring retired players together each year at an annual conference. The group's website indicates that of the 13,000 current NFL retirees, less than 175 attended the annual conference in Puerto Rico in 2008. Membership in the group's local chapters is reportedly declining as well.

Players after the NFL

While the range of occupations of retired NFL players is varied, a good number of them continue on in the sport in either a media-related role, coaching role, or some other organizational role that allows them to continue to be a part of the game they have dreamed of and prepared for all their lives. Many players have such extensive health issues that it is too hard for them to work. They are permanently disabled.

Most players are deselected, but those that left the game on their own have many varying reasons as well. Harold Raspberry talked about the wear and tear on his body, and he felt that he did not have the burning desire in his belly anymore and just decided to walk away on his own terms. Martin Willis retired around 1998, but he planned for his exit from the game many years before, working during the off season or working for CBS during the playoffs working to transition into television/radio. He is still doing radio and television. In Seattle he was a bright light. He went to Private University and played in the NFL for 15 to 16 years. Now he does radio play-by-play for the Raleigh Durham Mud Cats.

Stanley Davis was at the end of a successful career with the Dragons and the Knights when the WWF approached him and he decided to retire from football and go into professional wrestling. None of the players at the top of their game said they were leaving, except for Barry Sanders. Those that retired on their own knew that call was coming, but they decided to retire

before the organization could tell them. They wanted to beat the organization to the punch by getting out first on their own.

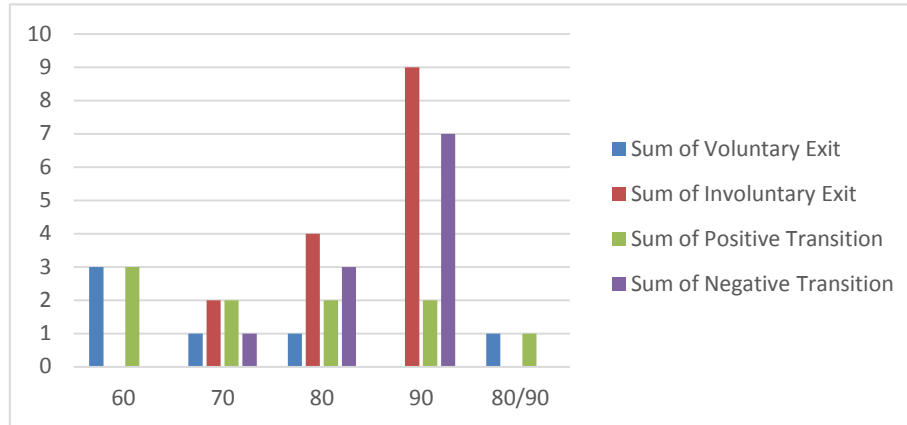
Barry Sanders was in his prime, at the top of his game, and he had records within his grasp that he could have shattered. With regard to Barry, Walter Frank states:

“All he had to do was play one more year and he had about four years left in him, but he said you know what, my goal coming into the league was to win a championship. I’ve been here 12 years and I don’t see it on the horizon and I’ve done all I can do as a player, so I’m stepping away. People were shocked and tried to convince him to come back; even the organization tried to dangle that he would be the all-time leading rusher. He said the records didn’t mean anything to him because he wanted to win a championship and he retired. The money, the fame and the records meant nothing to him. He was probably the highest paid running back in the league at that time. Now he just watches his son who is a senior in high school. He is very involved with his son’s career as far as going to see him practice and going to his games. He’s been out about 12 to 13 years. He was one of the youngest guys to be inducted to the Hall of Fame. He was 35 years old. You have to be retired at least five years before you can go into it. Barry wasn’t a flashy player who was role engulfed. He saved all of his money. He didn’t have a lot of kids. He never went out. He didn’t do anything to get himself in the press. You never heard about him going to restaurants. He would score and flip the ball back to the referee. He would just fit in like he was one of the guys, but he was the Detroit franchise. He was very shy. He didn’t talk on the field. He’d tap the top of your helmet and give you a thumbs up. He was frustrated that there wasn’t any movement toward a championship as a team. He wasn’t a free agent; he had four years left on his six year contract. He decided to just retire.”

The data collected in my interviews indicates the plausibility of the increase in involuntary exits and negative transitions as time passes and that it will most likely get worse. I believe, as the decades pass and the popularity of the sport increases along with the salaries of the players, they are more willing to keep playing the game, even when their bodies no longer have what it takes to endure the sport.

Table 4 shows the trends in my sample, illustrating the number of negative and positive transitions compared to the number of voluntary and involuntary exits by decade.

Table 4: Trends in Positive and Negative Transitions Compared with Voluntary and Involuntary Exits



This data relates to the autoethnographic information that I have experienced in both my playing and post-playing days. I have met so many retired players who still have negative feelings about their transition or are still in the process of a negative transition. As Walter Frank explains:

“It’s commonplace for the guys to discuss how hard it is to be a retired player. The spark is missing from their eyes. Their drive is missing. These guys do not want to fill out a survey that tells someone they are in a bad place. They do not want to go to a conference to tell anyone they have not been able to find a career that they love like they loved football. They do not want to be asked questions about how they are doing or what they are doing. It is just too uncomfortable for them, like salt in a wound.”

From a personal standpoint, I believe it takes so much to play the game of football because it takes so much to prepare your body. It is truly a process. I don’t care how much talent you have; it is still a process to make it to the NFL, and the more work you put in, the harder it is to surrender your love of the game when it is over. So, all that being said, to be good you have to be all in, and that comes with a cost because you have to forget everything else. You must sacrifice your social life. Some players sacrifice their academics to be the best. As you are making these sacrifices, you are shedding roles, all of

them, except the football one. That football player role expands.

We have seen only a little more than a handful of NFL players play another professional sport while playing in the NFL. Only one played another professional sport and then went to football. Tom Brown played multiple sports in college and went on to play two years of minor league baseball in 1963-1964. He did not have very good batting averages in baseball though. He was signed by the Green Bay Packers in 1964 and played for them through 1968. Most of the others had been multisport players in college, and some played minor or major league baseball, including Deion Sanders, Bo Jackson, Jim Thorpe, Drew Henson and Brian Jordan. Bo Jackson was an All-Star in baseball. I don't think either Deion or Brian Jordan was an All-Star, but Brian Jordan quit football to play baseball, receiving a signing bonus to quit football. Multiple professional sport players are rare, but even more interesting is that there is only one player that moved from a different "primary" sport to the NFL and that was decades ago. That just shows how difficult it is to play football on the professional level and how engulfed you have to be, because if players could, they would be playing some games on Sundays.

While in my role of Director of Player Development, I never got in touch with guys who were cut. My responsibility and the responsibility of others in my role across the NFL was to help new guys transition into the team and trying to get all the players to start thinking about what they want to do after they are done. So players that were deselected became depressed because something they trained for since they were eight years old was taken away. At the age of 27, they are out of their element and out of confidence. These guys used to be the most confident people in our society and then their confidence was shattered. They still have a name in their community and have been around people with significant wealth and influence, but they did not take advantage of those relationships. They were in rooms with decisions makers, trustees and top business men in their city, but they did not know how to leverage those connections to their benefit when their playing days were over. Role engulfment is the reason. They were so focused on self and sport that they did not understand what it would mean to meet someone such as William Tipton. They could have built a relationship by asking William if they could come to his sales team's meeting and make a presentation about pursuing goals. It would not have been difficult either. The player could just talk about the Knights and tell behind-the-scenes football stories and how they prepared for games, free of charge. Building those types of relationships and capitalizing on a player's fame can give them access to board rooms and opportunities to have conversations with company decision makers, opportunities that are not really brought to the attention of the players. Being in that environment may help a player find a part of that business he may like.

Perhaps it is sales or accounting or the manufacturing or operations, and that player may say, "You know what? I'd like to do this when I'm done." If that is the case, the player already has an inside relationship with the CEO or COO and the individuals who run the company.

Results of Role Engulfment and Diversification

Players who diversify their interests and social circles by getting an education and maintaining a variety of relationships fare better than those that remain engulfed and dependent only on football culture. Those who stay connected to enterprises outside the professional football field have some impressive stories. In this study, you'll read about players who decided to attend graduate schools, successfully invested in the stock market or in real estate, and decided to become coaches and physical therapists. They understood that thinking of themselves primarily as football players could be detrimental to them later in life, and they made plans for their transitions out while they were playing and some even before. They experienced as much pressure as any other player to not spend all their time thinking about retirement, but they resolved their role conflict in favor of becoming more well-rounded individuals.

Ben Michaels wasn't role engulfed. He was a left tackle, graduating from West Coast University in 1997. In high school, he lettered in football three times. He was a First-Team, All-American defensive tackle and the Western League Champion in discus. He was named one of San Antonio's 100 all-time greatest players. In college, he was moved to the offensive line and was First-Team All-Conference and a Second-Team, All-American offensive tackle. I think everybody thought he really did not care about football. Calvin Sanders played professionally with Ben and says:

"He was just good in college, and when he got to the pros, he was like this is ok but if I'm not playing I won't lose any sleep. He was always in the locker room reading books and newspapers. Kind of to himself, he had a couple of knee injuries that other guys would have played through, and the Packers cut him after a couple years. After he was released, he went to medical school and he is a medical doctor."

Ben, unlike most players, wasn't really engulfed or dependent on sport. To be accomplished, all of them risked being engulfed and had to dedicate time to their career. They were passionate about it. Danny Godette, for example, was smart and a good family man. A back-up player, he was always trying to coach guys up. He loved it. I never heard anyone in the locker room say, "I'm not studying this. Just give me the money."

The results of the extreme dedication to sport at the cost of working on other aspects of one's identity can really be seen during the transition period. Players that did not plan ahead and gave in to the pressures of a sport that demanded too much from them suffered because they often did not finish attaining their college degrees. Their lack of educational preparedness made them often feel insecure about entering new social circles and finding certain jobs without work experience. They rarely saved money that would have afforded them the time to comfortably move on, and since many of them had injuries that required costly treatments and medications, they needed quite a bit of time and money. They suffered psychologically too as many continued to seek the highs of playing football, feeling that no other career would provide the same thrill.

NFL fame does not get players much when their football career is over, at least not the same levels as when they were in the league. Because of their former status, some can still leverage their playing career into job opportunities and education and access to influential people. But they are at a disadvantage. If a player plays ten years, he's roughly 32 years old and needs to find a new line of work. He has to compete with people that have been in the job market for more than ten years, peers who have done internships, gone to graduate school and have gone on countless interviews. While a player got plenty of reps running plays on the practice field, his former classmates also got reps, but in a different genre. Competing with them put the NFL player behind big time.

Many players are not ready mentally for the transition because they are depressed about the way their playing days ended. The majority did not leave on their own terms. It is rare when a player retires voluntarily, and most were bitter about leaving. They had been the best of the best from Pop Warner all the way through middle school, high school and college. They had the "you need me to win" attitude, and this fed into the glorified self. When playing at a high level, whether it is in a board room or in a stadium, 60 to 70 percent of the game is mental and now these players are trying to compete with former classmates in a mentally "impaired" state. As a result, many start self-medicating which leads to addiction and deeper depression. But if they would just fall back on and lean on everything they learned to get to the elite level of playing in the National Football League, there is nothing they couldn't accomplish in corporate America. That journey to the NFL is like no other when it comes to preparation, mental toughness, physical strength, communication, perseverance, problem solving, memory recall, team building and leadership skills.

CHAPTER 7: WHERE DID THE MONEY GO?

On June 2, 1992, I received my first paycheck from the Green Bay Packers for \$45,000. I was hesitant to spend the signing bonus because I was not guaranteed another check until after training camp. I put the check in the bank and waited. After six weeks of training camp, I made the 53-man roster. The first item on my list was to secure an apartment. When I filled out the application, I was denied. I was fortunate to have a teammate willing to co-sign for my apartment. I did not have enough financial experiences to build my credit. In retrospect, this was time when I began to look to the veterans on the team for financial guidance. My family could not understand the magnitude of my financial responsibility, so I had to look to those around me to see how they were spending in their role as NFL football players.

Many players fall prey to the rampant spending that characterizes some of the professional football culture, regardless of their upbringing. I was no different. My first major purchase was a 1992 white Corvette with red interior for \$38,000.

Multiple informants told me how they regretted partying excessively and blowing massive amounts of money. One account was particularly striking. Brandon Gold comes from an upper-middle-class family. His father worked at a bank, and he still did not have the money managing skills to handle his finances. He played for 11 years and lost everything he earned. He spent his money on drugs, women and bad investments. Gold did not think about the long-term ramifications of his spending behaviors. When his career ended, he had not saved the money that he needed or wanted. He continually postponed saving and just kept thinking that he would do it next year. So, at the end of his professional football career, he had nothing. He did not have a college degree to fall back on. He attended Private Academy, but he never got his degree. This made securing a job very difficult. Gold had dreams of a job in law enforcement, but drugs and the physical pounding his body absorbed while playing football shattered those dreams. He is physically unable to do some of the things that are essential to pass the physical fitness test in this field. Instead of pursuing that career, he became a physical trainer and works for a gym in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He is married and has a daughter. Gold summarizes his situation as such:

“It’s a shame because I’m a good looking white male and I can’t get a job because I don’t have a college degree. Because everything is set up for me to be successful, but basically I haven’t done my part and I felt like, ‘I’m in the pros. I’m living the fast life, and this money will continue to roll in for the rest of my life.’”

Players who earn their degree, despite the pressures not to, and those who save some of their massive salaries tend to fare better during the exit from sport. Saving indicates an understanding that the football role must end at some point. Charles Nobles is a player that got his degree and saved his earnings. He received a degree in finance from Bayou State University in three-and-a-half years. Nobles took the financial planning he learned and used it to his benefit in his role as a professional football player. He played for 12 years with three different teams. The vehicles he drove were simple and basic. He wore generic clothes, not designer suits. He was not thrown by the flashiness of the other players. He began saving his money from the beginning. He did lose some of his money when he went through a divorce, but this did not deplete his savings. What is perhaps most impressive is that Nobles did not use his degree to get a job in corporate America. He used it to direct his personal finances. He understood the importance of paying off debts as quickly as possible. I see Charles about once a year at the Packer reunion and he is doing well. He is retired in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He maintains a healthy connection to the NFL and is one of the individuals who did not find the transition phase as difficult.

Spending While in the NFL

Living the life of a professional athlete does come with legitimate expenses and extravagant spending. It is not uncommon for players to maintain multiple residences. A player obviously needs a place to stay during the season. The second residence is for the off-season. It is usually located in the player's hometown or in the area of their alma mater. Maintaining two homes does cost more and takes a toll on the bank account. This means two telephone bills, two cable bills, two electric bills, and two homes to furnish. The extravagant spending comes into play when you look at the size of the homes and the material goods within the home, like big-screen televisions, computers and artwork.

Players also spend extravagantly on automobiles. Three cars in a player's driveway is common. One is for the girlfriend or wife and two cars are for the player – a sports car and an SUV or Sedan. My most extravagant automobile purchases were a Mercedes and a Hummer.

Another interesting opportunity for players to spend extravagantly was for jewelry and apparel. Representatives were invited into the locker room periodically to address player needs and wants for personalized jewelry and apparel. Some players would spend \$250,000 on jewelry. Tailors would come in with clothing packages ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000. These packages would contain suits, shirts and ties. The tailors would take orders in

the preseason and have the packages ready for the season.

A player's family is the source of additional expenses. Players often provide financial support for their family members and all the other people who helped support them in the long journey to becoming a professional athlete. If a player is married, providing support for his wife's family was not uncommon. Players would spend money for family members to attend games. In order to get them to the games, purchasing airline tickets and arranging for hotels was essential.

Child support is also a financial concern for many players. Legal obligations are based on a player's earnings, and obviously, the more children a player has out of wedlock, the more money he has to pay for child support.

Young players coming into the NFL are unaware of the financial expectations and responsibilities bestowed upon them. It is natural to look for guidance in a new and unfamiliar territory; unfortunately, many young players look to veterans who are engulfed with a flashy lifestyle. The players who are saving their money are more reserved and do not display the celebratory behaviors young players seek and, thus, often get overlooked when rookies are searching out mentors. This is unfortunate because they could be a tremendous asset to rookies, especially when it comes to managing finances.

Far too many players fall in the category of those who do not save while in the NFL. They spend their money keeping up the appearance of being a well-known athlete. A player's trouble usually begins early in their career when they think they have achieved the "American Dream" after playing for a short time. Possessing money makes some players think what others perceive from a distance: that they will no longer have financial difficulty. This misperception encourages the mismanagement of money. Part of this pattern can be ascribed to the fact that many athletes enter the NFL without ever having been responsible for very much money. Tommy Jones describes putting most of his \$8,000 check right in his pocket. Spending was emphasized by those around him much more than saving was. Jones states:

"I was an eighth-round draft pick, so I made \$118,000 my first year. I got \$25,000 to sign, but now you are talking about a youngster in Virginia making \$7,000 to 8,000 every few weeks, and I had never seen that much money before, and to me that was a lot."

Jones had never had his "own cash" before. Money was solely in the hands of his mother when he grew up. He became overly excited by the prospect of having his own money and of having no one to supervise his spending habits. Partaking in the party culture is not a matter of rebelling, just enjoying the lifestyle and celebrating the success. It is similar to a nine-year-

old cashing in a lottery ticket. Many players have been waiting to cash in and enjoy the freedom of becoming an adult without being constrained by a college dorm or mandatory scheduling.

For many athletes, high salaries become synonymous with complete independence from responsibility. On one hand, players' bodies and athletic abilities are closely monitored, but on the other, they receive little financial counseling. As a result, finances are a major issue of concern for many retired players (Pitts, Popovich, & Bober, 1994). Jones spoke of the following:

"That was my name on the check. Now I know guys that were making millions more than that, but when I cashed that \$8,000 check, I was walking around with like \$5,000 of it in my pocket. I was in Richmond. We went to the mall. I went to the Ford dealer and put \$5,000 down and got me a truck."

Frequently these athletes have financial responsibilities for many other people. Before signing, Jones had one child and another on the way. As much as some players want to believe they are independent, they often find that, once they start getting paid, their money must also go toward expenses related to their families. Jones had already been divorced in his early twenties. Though he had working-class parents who saved money, he still acted out as soon as he became a professional player, even missing meetings on account of partying.

Brandon Gold describes similar behavior and also attributes it to being surprised at the sheer amount of money that was around him. Not having had much money prior to his professional career, at 23 he believed his salary was unlimited. He bought things that he did not need, blind to any signs that he was being destructive. This deviant behavior also can be attributed to the fact that most of those interviewed saw themselves as different from average citizens. Money allowed them to demonstrate how different they were from others. Jones describes the culture of the NFL as one where players do not save but obsess over possessing expensive objects like the flashiest cars. As he tells it, he was spiraling out of control and wasting his earnings without intervention.

During his interview, an introspective Jones made the point that making money does not necessarily mean dysfunctional behavior disappears in the case of those athletes mired in economic and personal problems. His behavior in sport was in many ways a continuation of his behavior before he made a large salary. As Jones notes,

"I wasn't thinking about any mutual funds. I already had a son, and my daughter was being born, so I was paying child support, so there was a lot of dysfunctional stuff that was

going on.”

Clearly, it is this pattern of thinking that guarantees a difficult adjustment during the transition phase. Jones’ situation exposes the risks of role engulfment, especially when one’s peers are not focused on supporting each other to balance academic life with social life in productive and healthy ways. He describes a party culture made available to players such that they even had trouble staying awake at meetings. His own susceptibility to being controlled by the culture came from wanting to fit in and look like what he thought a professional athlete should look like. Spending excessively is a matter of living up to stereotypical notions of how a professional football player should act. Their entire focus is on playing the role of the star athlete.

Many former players are concerned with advising current athletes to respond to role engulfment differently than they did. Jones states:

“I would try to get him to understand the big picture right at the beginning, just like my agent tried to get me to do. What I would do different is I would’ve accepted the help of my agent with finding a financial planner and living up to the plan that we have set, as far as spending budget, looking for after the season only having x amount of dollars that you can spend. So, what my agent was trying to get me to do was don’t spend all of your money on material stuff. Think about what if you got cut three years from now, and you can’t go out there and play anymore and you living within your means? What I would do differently is basically is tell him exactly to take a look at the habits that I had and where it got me. My mind was not really focused on reality. It was focused on the whole persona of the NFL. That is a hard question to answer direct, but I would just be more money cautious. The reason I say that is because really I had the foundation there. I just didn’t use it. I didn’t tap into it. So, what I would do is, I would have tapped into my resources and my upbringing because really my mom and how they managed money, old school, and practical. All that partying, that ain’t about nothing. So, I would have tapped into my resources that I had available to me at that time willingly.”

Some of those negative coping mechanisms that athletes rely on while struggling with the demanding culture of the NFL come from an inability to see the “big picture.” Some athletes do not see participation in professional sports as simply a part of their educational process and as a step in a long-term career path. Athletes go in seeing the football player as an identity that can be

occupied for his entire life. That is how all-encompassing it is. Thus, they make mistakes, such as spending all of their money, socializing or lending money to family and close friends without saving any for themselves and their futures without football.

Interestingly, Jones states that his environment had in fact also given him examples of frugal living. Even though he thought it was his class background that led him to spend, he now realizes that it was a combination of factors and that many of his working-class family members were frugal and never flashy. He realizes he could have used those examples, reaching out to those individuals who were not rich but who knew how to save, to begin thinking about the move out of sport in a positive way.

Jones also gave his money to his large, financially strapped family. Those dire circumstances would make it difficult for anyone to know what to do with his or her money without advice. He describes helping them more than he helped himself. Given his closeness to them while growing up, it was particularly difficult to know what to do when they asked him for help.

“Oh yeah, the family was basically a part of it too. Everybody was hitting me up when I came around. Most of my family, I was really close with. I grew up with my dad’s family and my mom’s family really close because I had so many cousins on both sides. I slept on the floor with them. I went out and picked strawberries in the fields or picking raspberries. I went down south and watched those boys get out the cotton field. So, I have experienced certain things with them; so, when they asked me for stuff, I didn’t have a problem with saying yes. I was kindhearted. So, yes, my family did hit me up, and I helped them more than I helped myself and that was part of my downfall too...But when it all changed was when I went to Grand Rapids. You know the little money I did make, I was able to save some because I did get my mom and my aunt involved when everything was going crazy. So I did tap into that resource later. If it wasn’t for those resources that they helped me to put away, I wouldn’t even have been able to get set up to come out here. When I needed \$1,000 to get an apartment or a little car, if it wasn’t for them and the \$78,000 I was able to put away, I wouldn’t have had that.”

Certain athletes face financial challenges when they get money because their families start to view them as breadwinners. They get pressured to loan money to those that may not be able to ever pay them back, causing a confusing situation for an inexperienced and emotionally vulnerable

individual. Regret over the loss of this self-identity is a factor during the transition period in that athletes experience a change in terms of how they see themselves without as much income or social support (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). Thus, as frustrating as giving money to family members may be, not being able to play that role also leaves athletes depressed in the future. The short career of the player must be taken into consideration by athletes planning to be stand-up citizens in the eyes of family members. Family members often ask NFL players for money, thinking they are financially set for life. This pressure is not unique to players from any particular class, and taking on the identity of the one with money makes it difficult for them to figure out how to count on family and how to mobilize their social networks appropriately. Learning to use family as social support should begin long before the moment of retirement, a positive way of dealing with financial success and stress. Athletes who figured out how to engage family members for their benefit fared well all-around during transition. Jones, for example, missed an opportunity as he played into the culture of spending that characterizes professional athletic life. Frugality is a necessary virtue of those in the poor community, and Jones finally learned to cope positively with the transition after he got his family to help him rather than vice versa.

Living with or without Savings: The Psychic Toll of Income Loss

The problem of not having saved is made more stressful by the fact that few other professions will actually pay former players what they had become accustomed to making. For both psychological and practical reasons, this is disheartening to those who have left football without sufficient savings. When asked whether or not he thought the work he was offered was beneath him since leaving his team, Jones responded by saying he did not think the jobs he could get would pay him the amount of money he desired at the moment. An athlete's attitude toward work also has bearing on the transition phase and can prolong the time he spends in limbo. Some of the hesitation derives from not finishing college, a negative coping mechanism cited by a number of scholars (Coakley, 2006; Haerle, 1975). In part, Jones hesitated when it came to taking jobs or choosing a second occupation because he was figuring out what place the pursuit of his college degree would take in his life. As he recounts:

“Really, it was more of ‘that wasn’t going to pay me the type of money that I want right now.’ I wasn’t thinking about the guys being beneath me; yeah, that was part of it too, but I’m thinking about trying to make some money because I was used to having checks for thousands and just to be on a salary for \$15 an hour, I just couldn’t do that. That is not enough for

me. For those years, that is how I looked at work—not necessarily that that was beneath me to do, but I just didn’t want to do that at the time because I was trying to do this and other stuff. I just didn’t want to do that. But I ended up spending more money to go nowhere in the end. Now I still have a foundation of that same product that I had back then, but I could have been working and doing the same thing back then, but I didn’t want to do that.”

Jones was not necessarily looking for a job with the same status as a professional athlete, though he did seek commensurate pay. His lack of an education left him unqualified for high-paying jobs. He had no competence in another occupation, making the transition difficult (Coakley, 2006). Not only did the years of participating in the NFL put him at a disadvantage in the job market, but he subsequently spent years deciding what to do next. That also makes the transition difficult. Thus, pre-planning is an essential activity as athletes are unaware of how long it will take to even decide to get their feet wet in another occupation (Coakley, 2006).

Some athletes do thrive financially during the transition period. A few players use the money they made in football to invest in lucrative opportunities. For example, Benjamin Tate purchased a malt liquor distributorship for \$250,000. Tate says:

“Through the years, many of my fellow Grand Rapids Dragons asked me why I bothered to get an MBA from the Northern University, and I’m proud to tell them that my education was the main reason why I’ve experienced some business success.”

Tate served on Crystal Lake University’s Board of Trustees and through the years, he has served on the boards of 17 publicly traded companies (including ten boards at one time); he also was a trustee at Northern University. Playing football earns many players respect. Celebrity status can be used wisely if one has the vision and the foresight to do so. During his Crystal Lake board service, Tate witnessed a period of transition both at universities and within many companies as institutions were seeking to promote racial diversity in their leadership. He states:

“It’s one of the things I take pride in, and I was often the first African American to serve on a board. I always saw myself as a link to the black community in Crystal Lake when I served as a trustee at CLU; I learned a great deal while serving on that board at a school that always places students first.”

Tate currently serves on the board of Media Giant, which won an award for its commitment to diversity; he sits on the board of Midwest City and Trust as well.

In addition to saving money and investing wisely, players benefit from acquiring money-making skills. Hakeem Chapman is a good example. He rates his transition an 8.5 or 9 out of 10—ten being positive. He played in the 1960s, when it was expected that athletes would take part in other endeavors. The role of the athlete was not as all-encompassing as it is now. Chapman used his off-season time very productively, working mostly in retail and in business. He also made sure to network. Because smaller NFL salaries mean lower investment and lower athletic identity, he was very aware that he needed to make money. Chapman describes:

“Every year, I did something different because back then, we worked. One year, I got my real estate license. Another year, I got my stockbroker’s license. Another year, I worked for Zales Corporation. I learned about jewelry. I did a lot of things.”

No. You never know how long this is going to last, and when I quit, I had made enough relationships networking with people. I wanted to turn it into something. I went into the printing business. That is the one. As we go, I will tell you the things I did, and I did them successfully. The people at Zales wanted me to come on and go corporate. Retail works on weekends, and I like weekends off, you know what I mean?”

Beginning to look for another career often requires random investigation of different businesses. Athletes have to remain open and flexible to opportunities that come their way. Dependence upon sport often impedes this. Those who have difficulties with transition take longer to allow themselves to try out work in different businesses. Chapman was a self-starter who explored many outlets and opportunities:

“Retail is when you are selling things. Usually, you work in places where they work on Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. But if you work in an office or office building, you don’t work on weekends. So I put myself in a position where if I got hurt or when it was all over, I would have a place to fall back on. Doing those six months, after I had had about six occupations to fall back on, I started to—at the end of my career, when I had saved my money—I started to travel. I would just go somewhere in Europe for three to four or five months. I

would just go over there and meet some people and learn the language and do that number. The next year, I went to real estate school, and I studied with a real estate company. That was a big thing. Real estate was hot back then.

Chapman's endeavors were successful ones, making the loss of football for him a less traumatic situation. He used his money to travel to Europe and to learn other languages. He was a very forward-thinking player. He also bought properties, not just to live in to impress others, but to sell. He relates:

"I did that for two or three years. I had eight properties. When you buy eight properties on the beach and just watch them appreciate, it is unbelievable. You hit the key word. I learned the word 'appreciate,' not 'depreciate.' In everything I got involved with, I wanted to know, 'Does it appreciate?' How do I make money on it?"

Time in the NFL can be time learning about investing money if one seizes the opportunity to learn. A deal was presented to Chapman while in the NFL that became a very lucrative investment. He explains:

"First of all, Chris Snell put me into a deal. He presented it to everybody after a practice. He said, 'Hey you guys, I have a friend here in town, and if you want to make a wise investment, come over to the Ramada Inn tonight at 8:00.' Only eight guys showed up. The guy was going to take it back because the whole team didn't come. So he said, 'Let's go back to my room.' So we go back to his room, and he said, 'Look, I have this stock that is going to go through the roof. Whatever change you have, put it in. Buy it.' I raised my hand and said, 'I only have \$8,000' –which was a lot of money back then. This was around 1967. Chris put \$100,000 in, and the stock went wild. It went crazy. It was at 45. It went to 125 and split. For every one share, you got five shares. It came back down and went back up. It came back down to 45 and went to 125 and split again; or one share, you got five shares. It split seven times, and within six months and a day, I think it was called a long-term capital gain, and I made \$283,000 back in 1967."

Chapman prospered from an initial investment of \$8,000. As he discovered firsthand from his investment experience, moving into a second career requires learning new lingo as well. Businesses have their own key words and unique set of practices, but he was not disconcerted. His desire to make money for the future allowed him to tackle that hurdle. The salary he

was making playing professional football was just the beginning for him. Chapman states:

“Yes, and with that money, it gave me the margin to do anything I wanted to do. That is why I took up real estate. That is why I got involved in all sorts of things because back then, \$283,000 was a lot of money. I was probably making \$20,000 a year playing football. And here I just made \$283,000.”

Chapman remained in tune with current business trends, entering real estate when there was much activity in that sector. He mentions learning the key questions to ask when it came to real estate and property value. With the money he made in real estate, he invested in the stock market and is comfortable describing that activity as well.

Chapman’s achievements are remarkable: investing; purchasing apartment complexes and hotels; and owning 67 percent of a shopping center. He chose to quit football because he might get hurt. The mere idea of quitting because of the fear of getting hurt would be startling to most players in the NFL today. He refused contracts for the sake of his health, which is what is at stake and why players must be encouraged to try financial planning early in their careers so that they have a solid foundation on which to fall when the game is over.

Beyond money-making, Chapman speaks of his personal life. Whereas many players interviewed for this study experienced divorce, Chapman talks about avoiding marriage because he did not know whether or not he would be capable of taking care of a wife. He is a careful guy who always wanted to make sure he could financially handle having a family. He also valued his independence as he explains:

“Never married ever. I don’t want someone just to come and ride my wagon. I wanted them to bring something to the table too. Now, I find women who can bring things to the table. Back then, you had to take care of the women.”

Chapman adds that what he has to offer players today is “basic advice: prepare for tomorrow.” Preparedness is not a complicated concept but needs to be reinforced over and over again. Chapman counsels:

“Prepare for tomorrow, meaning look at the things that you want to do with your life. Do you want to be in a position where you are comfortable? That worried me a lot because I wanted to be comfortable when I finished. The kids now, they need to buy the things that you need right now, not what you want. That is the key thing. Later on, you can buy what you

want. But if you buy what you want now and buy what you want as you go, you won't have very much to buy what you might want later. There are players—you think they sign a \$10 million guaranteed thing and it's OK. They don't realize that the government gets a third of it or 35 percent, and then they are going to go for depreciated items. Like Devin. He bought this house in Miami, and he still hasn't sold it. He has been out of Miami how many years now—two or three years? And he is still probably making payments on it. Those payments are deductible, but, my goodness. And so you should buy the things that you need, not the things that you want.”

Chapman admits thinking about the idea of being comfortable, a concept that may be unfamiliar to athletes enraptured by the idea of a wealthy lifestyle. Contracts and bonuses are presented to athletes without information about how they will be taxed, for example.

Chapman defied the odds in a number of ways. He did not have a father growing up, but he could accept mentoring from coaches and older professional players.

“No, I didn't have a father, so I did have advice from a mentor. Tenth grade. He wanted me to go to college, his college. But by the time I became a senior, he said wherever you go, I will take care of you. I became a senior, and I went to Utah; he still backed me. Every Friday, I would get \$25 in the mail. And \$25 was a lot of money back then. Every Friday, you had date money. You know how you line up in a dentist office or doctor's office, and the person says #5, #5, and the guy comes up and comes up to your dorm, and I would say, 'How much do you need?' I would loan money out at the school. And Friday, guys would be lined up in front of my dorm, wanting to borrow money. I've been playing ever since.”

Perhaps this is why Chapman was and continues to be—so shrewd financially. He gives simple advice when it concerns saving, which many of the other players did not follow. Simply put, you buy what you need, and only what you need, especially in light of the behavior of those getting such large contracts. Athletes make real estate purchases without thinking about how likely it is that they can sell that property at a later time. This can be detrimental, especially as most players' salaries are not guaranteed. News about huge contracts has the effect of motivating young men to play sports,

but they do not receive all of the information an athlete needs to have for working toward long-lasting life satisfaction.

CHAPTER 10: YOU CAN'T MAKE THE CLUB IN THE TUB

For some athletes, a commitment to football becomes synonymous with ignoring the possibility of suffering serious injury. Reasons for denial range from players feeling responsible for the financial well-being of their families, to feeling as if they have no other options when it comes to lifestyle and career choices. In some cases, players are simply addicted to the glory and achievement of playing a great game.

Watching close friends deal with injury is a major part of the NFL experience, and almost any player could be a researcher studying this phenomenon. Many of the injured ignore the possibility that playing will make their physical health worse in the near and far future. This behavior is so common that many players just do not know that they should be more concerned.

In 1996, Tommy Jones got hit while playing and had a stinger, a pretty common injury in the NFL. He would get ice packs put on his neck and then every day before practice, he would put a heating pad on his neck. The next year, he got another stinger; we all thought that was just part of the game. Last year, he had a pinched nerve. He recently had neck surgery, and now his whole left side is atrophied. The pain is widespread—in his chest muscles as well as his biceps and triceps. He now cannot lift with his left arm. Half of his upper body is like that of a man 20 years older. He is permanently disabled at age 42. There was something really wrong with him while he was still playing. He just did not know it, and it would have been difficult for him to accept it, given how much he cared about the game. Even though he knew his neck was hurt, he played until he suffered a herniated disk. He lived in a state of denial common to many football players. He especially did not want to hear or know about the physical risks because that was how he earned a living for his family. He just thought this is what football players do, and if he was going to do this for the rest of his life, he had to persevere.

Though players know a career typically lasts 3.5 years, they have a hard time accepting that this statistic could apply to them. They do not always consciously recognize how strange it is that they play until they are hurt because so many players do that. They rarely think about the impact the game will have on their health and physical well-being 20 years later. The impact of injury on a player's future is the greatest unforeseen consequence of being pushed so hard.

Carl McKenzie tore his Achilles tendon while playing. He is having a hard time getting around and sometimes uses a cane to walk—all at the age of 43. He also tore a quad muscle, an injury that forced his exit from the NFL. Typically, unless you have a neck injury, you can come back, but because he

was in his 11th year of playing, he was nowhere close to being in playing condition.

While being interviewed for the study, a number of athletes mentioned that they started getting into the habit of pushing their way through injury very early in their careers. Andre Blackburn remembers:

“My senior year in high school, I blew my knee out. So my fall was basically finding a way so that I would be able to condition myself for college and a scholarship.”

Denial begins and develops at an early age. Though transition is definitely a major moment of crisis in an athlete's life, usually there are signs that their exit is approaching and may happen involuntarily due to injury. The fact that being engulfed can convince these athletes to pursue sport even when they have faced such serious injury early on at times reveals a desperation and vulnerability about which sports psychologists should be aware and should address.

Being injured early on did not necessarily affect the success of some of these players as they were in such better shape than most people around them. Given their overall physical superiority, it was easy for them to downplay the significance of injury in high school, college and during the professional seasons. Andre Blackburn comments:

“Yeah, still after blowing my knee out and not playing any of my senior year, I was still one of the top five players recruited in the state of Maryland, but I was targeted to be the number one player recruited in the country.”

More often than not, athletes are so eager to perform that they can deny knowledge of the severity of their injury. Their reactions and ability to keep pushing on represent a stance towards health in general—one that can later have an impact on their athletic retirement.

By putting rehabilitation over quitting, athletes can validate their risky behavior. Defeating injury is interpreted as a powerful and heroic act in the sports ethic. Early triumphs over injury contribute to an athlete's dependence on sport and help them solidify their values (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Luckily for some, experiences with injury also help them appreciate the importance of the medical field and encourage them to pursue that line of work for their post-athletic career.

Being Deselected Because of Injury

Many players live in denial about the very real possibility of being cut due to injury. One player expressed the thoughts of many when he wrote that he

saw many players losing their positions but constantly thought, “It’s not going to be me.” Voluntary exit leaves players feeling less traumatized, but many seem unable to make that choice for themselves. It is difficult for many players to free themselves of the mental and emotional pressures that brought them to the sport. Michael Arrington describes how the desire to succeed can feed a powerful denial:

“I guess I have to speak for myself. It’s not going to be me. You say, ‘Wow, that’s messed up for that guy, but that is not going to be me.’ So I feel like you will want it forever. You will find that even now. A lot of guys find it hard to leave the game. You don’t want to leave even if their body and everyone else is telling them to leave, but sometimes guys have the opportunity to walk away on their own accord. Like in my case, I did not. You want to say it’s not really gonna be you. You never really see it, and you feel everything for those guys, but you never really take it to that next level. You just see it for what it is.”

Despite having recognized the troubling aspects of the culture, Michael remained in sport to the point of intense injury.

Often as a way to ignore the fact that they may causing themselves irreparable damage through the sport, athletes spend a great deal of money taking care of their bodies while playing. Large sums of money add to the athletes’ ability to cover up some of their buried insecurities regarding what is happening to them. David Jordan comments:

“I had absolutely no knowledge whatsoever of money. For a normal person to understand, the only example I can give you is a 23-year-old person who has never had anything and then had unlimited funding constantly, and the better you play and the harder you work, the more money you have the possibility of making, which I did. And it takes a lot of money to sustain that lifestyle, and when I talk sustaining it, I didn’t mean sustaining it as up-keeping it like your Benz, I mean up-keeping the machine that was me. That was like \$200 getting someone to work on me physically or to buy every supplement I could find, or having the best equipment and the best relaxation. I found personally that money I spent on myself to improve my physical condition and pamper myself when I wasn’t really beat up [helped me be] more successful, so I continued that kind of spending.”

Much of Jordan’s money was spent desperately, making sure he could

continue playing and stay on top of his game physically. What his comments demonstrate is that he was actively resisting voluntary exit. Money also deluded him into thinking that he could live with injury. He had pampered himself, as if he could avoid injuries that were developing and getting worse. There is even reason to believe from his interview that the increase in consulting with trainers and health care professionals caused him to believe that he could live and play with injury and not suffer unduly from the consequences of having been hurt. Kane (1991) identifies denial as a common emotion that repeats itself throughout the process of transitioning. It is not just one stage in the process as a strict application of the Kubler Ross (1969) Model might suggest. Role engulfment while in sport is characterized by forsaking some aspects of the self to play the role of the athlete. One of the major ways this is accomplished is by not paying attention to health.

Eventually, Michael Arrington experienced an involuntary transition with injuries that would sound horrifying to just about anyone. He was even warned by doctors about the consequences of continually placing himself in such danger. Arrington says:

“I ended up getting out due to injury, and I think that accelerated the whole thing. I had four concussions in a two-year span. The last one I got in training camp kind of was like getting released, and a couple of teams called. I was told things from, ‘If you hit your head bad again, you may suffer severe brain damage,’ and stuff like that. Those are the things that you kind of get nervous about, especially when you have young kids.”

Arrington attributes the masochism (playing through four concussions) in part to being a father and, thus, having an urgent reason to make money. But it is also true that many other football players had done this before and for a time, the league did little to stop this behavior. The after-life for Arrington, as it is for many players, includes seeing friends who look physically withered and keeping in touch with those who are in dire financial straits. This constitutes part of the shock that players must deal with while transitioning.

Living with Injury during the Transition

Recently, health problems suffered by football players have been making headlines. In particular, discussions of football concussions have made the news, causing fans and players to take more seriously how severely debilitating football injuries can be. Many athletes are now trying to figure out ways to secure their health while still enjoying the game. Otis Taylor explains:

“We were just talking tonight, and one of the guys, he only played two years, but he had stopped because of concussions. Concussions are a big deal now, but he had stopped because of concussions, and he was talking, and he was saying some of the things like he was scared for his kids to play football now because of some of the things that he suffered. You have guys that have back pain. You have guys that had knee surgery that are limping now. You have guys that can’t get around or take care of themselves, because physically, it is hard for them to even go work out and try to stay in shape. Because of the things that they took, most guys don’t realize that when you leave the game of football, you are in the best top shape of your life. You are an elite athlete, and when you leave that game, back then, they were giving you five years of benefits, but after that, you are in the top shape of your life, and nothing is really bothering you that much. When you hit that 35, 37, 40, 42, and 45 age, all that stuff starts to come back. So, we have guys that have had hip replacements at age 35, guys that had hip replacements at 36. You have guys that are on disability from injuries suffered in football, and I am talking about guys that are 32, 33 years of age who played football. Not war veterans, you are talking about people who played football.”

Concussions are not the only danger that players face. It will take time for the full extent of physical damage done to athletes while playing football to be understood. Furthermore, some injuries and some types of bodily deterioration are only felt after exiting sport. During the transition, some players are burdened and saddened by constantly having to visit the doctor or by needing complicated surgeries and medications.

Given the fact that he functioned for a while as the main breadwinner for his family and could not see another path towards success, Tommy Jones pushed himself to the point of serious injury. He suffered from a neck injury—a pinched nerve that got worse every year he played. One untreated injury can affect other parts of the body. Jones explains:

“Now my health, I just had a disc fusion surgery on May 24 because of the pinched nerve in my neck. You remember every year I used to get a bigger and bigger neck roll. What was happening was the wear and tear built up scar tissue, and it started to pinch the nerve. So, now, I was losing feeling in my whole left side.”

Injuries that are not treated while playing football rarely just go away once an athlete stops playing. The feeling that Tommy Jones lost in his left side has never returned, causing him serious distress. He is shocked because he never imagined that injury would be permanent. The injury he faces has intensified the difficulty of the transition period because it so greatly affects the range of jobs for which he can apply. On top of that, he, like many athletes who experience transition trauma, does not have an education on which to fall back.

A number of researchers have written about the way in which injury makes both emotional adjustment to and the search for a second occupation difficult (Taylor & Ogilvie 1998; Lerch 1981; Pitts, Popovich and Bober 1989). Many athletes push themselves to the point of serious injury, only to truly understand the consequences upon or long after the moment of forced retirement. Physical pain intensifies the emotional pain, embarrassment or shock that many feel upon exit.

Tommy Jones points out that jobs that requiring significant lifting are impossible for him. But he even has difficulty with a job that requires him to sit in front of a computer. After a certain point, complete rehabilitation is not possible and an ex-player may go from being someone with an extremely confident self-image derived from his body, to someone dealing with disability and limited resources. As Jones recounts:

“Right now, I wouldn’t be able to have a job where I had to lift a lot. I even have a problem with the job that I am in now. It requires me to sit in front of the computer, calling students all day, leaning, switching between different program screens, typing, leaning forward a lot. So, that is where I started getting all the neck and back problems. That is when it really started to affect me to the point where I went to a neurologist for the nerve pain, because it was a combination from the base of my neck and then my back, my arm, and then it progressively got worse to where they ordered me a special chair just for me to be at work. So, for me to do my job still with that nerve pain required me to type with my hands, where from the nerve damage, I got carpal tunnel. I was diagnosed with carpal tunnel, and really when I am driving, I am supposed to drive with a brace on my hands. That affected me being able to sit down for long periods of time. Now, after the surgery, the pain has intensified in a different area, and now I still can’t sit down for more than like an hour at a time. I have to stand up and walk around. So, it is affecting me being able to sit down for periods of time without my shoulder

and arm going numb and having sharp nerve pain in my back.”

Tommy Jones compares the experience of having played football to fighting in the trenches, though he is aware that the choice he made was his. Injuries affect both work performance and job options. Injury makes the emotional pain of forced retirement even more difficult according to some researchers. It affects a player’s self-esteem as well since his body image changes.

Besides the loss of salary and positive self-perception, the loss of health care benefits seems to be one of the major sources of difficulty for those who transition out of sport involuntarily. Otis Taylor states:

“I know a few guys who played in older times. I think they have a more difficult time for a lot of different reasons. One is the benefits. A lot of the guys didn’t have the benefits that they have currently today. With health care these days, a lot of guys with an ACL injury in the 1970s was something that could have ended your career—well, now the guys come back the following year. But a lot of time when those guys had those injuries, they didn’t really rehab them right or recover well, and now you see guys that look older than they actually should be. So, I think from the financial side most guys from those times have difficult times, but at the same token, I think physically a lot of guys got banged up pretty bad. I think the understanding of life after, a lot of guys missed out on that.”

Young and old players alike struggle with the issue of not being able to pay for the adequate health insurance. Health problems only add to the fear that this time of life will be a period without end. Brandon Gold currently has no health insurance for himself or for his kids. Paying the \$600 monthly premium would be a burden according to him. Fortunately, his wife contributes to his income as well. But not all players are so lucky. Gold’s story is instructive.

“It is an issue, because now I have a family, and my wife does very well. She makes jewelry. She makes decent money. I make decent money as a physical trainer for older, wealthy people in my area, so that is nice, but I have no health insurance [for me or my kids], and it is \$600 a month right now, and it is definitely a burden. You know I’ve worried because I wake up certain days when I can’t move so well, so it is scary. The future for health is extremely scary because I try to follow up getting something simple as checking out my

neck...it costs \$2,100 to get an MRI and my insurance, they don't want to cover it. I'm talking this was from a week ago. They were like they weren't aware of the injury I had. What kind of car accident were you in? They didn't even know I played football. The chiefs are really going to trip out when they figured out who they have insured! That is junky insurance. I pay \$600 a month. It is not like insurance in the NFL. It doesn't even cover dental or a lot of other issues."

During transition, Brandon Gold has been lucky enough to be able to depend on his wife for financial assistance. Relying on one's family and social network is a positive coping mechanism (Pitts, Popovich & Bober, 1989). Fame did not help him as much as family and his extended social network (Reynolds 1981).

Being pushed to the limit, the deterioration of some athletes' bodies is gruesome. Gold's injury was so grave that he was asked by one doctor who saw him, "What kind of car accident were you in?" upon an initial visit. Gold's future and well-being remain uncertain. He exemplifies how lack of transition preparedness can end rather grimly. He had been unaware of the cost of benefits while in the NFL. If he had sat down and calculated the price of paying for adequate health insurance, his life decisions might have changed.

Health insurance is a benefit many players had not reported using while in the NFL but then find that they need it badly, perhaps much more urgently in the after-life than when they actually played football. Gold admits to being scared and uncertain during the adjustment period. Health problems become emotional ones (Pitts, Popovich & Bober, Coakley, Schwenk), as some athletes are forced for the first time to ask sobering questions: How will I make ends meet? How will I pay for the doctors who can take care of this injury?

Similar to many athletes, Gold was slow to examine his health problems. He says he "found out" how beat up his body was, as if he had not been aware of the problems while experiencing the injuries.

"I found out how beat up my body is and I have, on all these trips, secretly wanted to learn more and knowledge about the body and how I can heal myself and how and what to eat and to do certain things, and that is kind of helping me with my being able to train people. I'm able to help a lot of 60- or 70-year-old people, because literally, I completely understand how they feel with injuries and how they recover because even though I am 38, I kind of have the same kind of issues. So it is a joke with them about how I am going to feel when I

am 60, but it is somewhat kind of scary saying that.”

Currently, Gold is simultaneously healing himself and others—similar to many athletes who turn negative transitions into positive ones. Helping older people with their physical pain, he is also learning about his own future. Some athletes are able to turn the negative and difficult experience around, even if they do not go into a field that is completely unrelated to athletics. As Gold demonstrates, a significant positive coping mechanism is to use the problems an athlete faces and transform those into skills that could be useful in another occupation. Gold perhaps also does so in his after-life in dealing with his own pain and training others how to manage theirs by adopting the mentality he learned from coaches. He shares how coaches tell players that at some point, they are going to get hurt. Coaches quickly follow up, saying that it is one thing to be injured and another thing to be hurt. If a player is injured with a broken leg, he cannot play; but if he is hurt, he can play through the pain. If it takes getting injections, taking pain medication, or just sucking it up and doing whatever you have to do you, a player is expected to play the game, with “the hurt” being simply part of it.

CHAPTER 11: LIFE SATISFACTION

Many former players get caught up in trying to fill the void from no longer playing professionally and losing the exceptional athletic skills they had for most of their life. The emotional high and adrenaline a player gets from running into a stadium and hearing people chant his name is tough to match later in life. Moving on means understanding and accepting that he will never be able to replace those moments—and that is okay. Too often, players try to fill the void through substance abuse, alcohol, women and “hangers-on.” Players sometimes surround themselves with people who remind them of their playing days. This enables athletes to escape back to that time and regenerate the feelings, emotions and memories.

The idea that satisfaction is only connected to football glory even influences many players’ post-football career selections. Many players like being around that feeling of adoration and seek jobs where they can stay connected to football. Careers in radio and TV are appealing because of the comfort area. These jobs allow them to not feel vulnerable and completely cut off from the sport. While many former athletes will do anything to stay around the sport, re-entering sport in a different capacity is not always easy. Job qualifications are still essential to secure a non-player position. This causes many athletes to feel frustration. They want to coach, but they cannot coach. They want to scout, but they cannot scout. They are not afraid of experiencing other areas; it is just that they have not had a chance to develop any other skill sets. Football is all that they have known from a very young age, and they believe they should be able to capitalize continually on that.

The Glorified Self as Addiction

Becoming addicted to the glorified sense of self can have many negative consequences for former players attempting to change careers. Thoughts of glory, fame and incredible achievement can overwhelm a person’s sense of what it means to be content. Instead of going for well-roundedness, some athletes continue to look for self-esteem in the eyes of others. For some players, a long-term career in sport also results in an over-estimation of their own skills. Those who maintain a narrow identity approach academics and job preparation in a way that leads to crisis rather than relief during the transition period. It is no surprise, therefore, when they experience high stress over the long haul.

A number of athletes admit that idealization of their own ability is part of this mindset as well. Confidence is developed in athletes without a reality check. As the stakes get higher and an individual becomes more successful in football, self-aggrandizement often increases. During the transition period,

some find it hard to relinquish the image they had of themselves and become depressed. Tommy Jones experienced a difficult transition out of sport because he identified so thoroughly with it. Transition represents a change in status and position within one's own community. This is difficult for some athletes to handle. Paradoxically, a class identification that made transition into money difficult also made transition into a lower status not as traumatic for Jones in comparison with other former players. Emotional problems are inevitable, but there are ways to cope. Life satisfaction is not necessarily completely gone when one's playing days are over, as Jones suggests:

"I never really tripped off that identity because I consider myself just a regular person. My mom and dad worked hard. I always had more than everybody that I was around pretty much. So I wanted to be a regular guy because some people were jealous, but at the same time, if I had it, you had it. You can come to my house and eat. If you don't have any money, don't worry about it; I have a car—and I was the only one that had a car then. So when I go to the leagues, even when I was at the club in D.C., I didn't really trip."

With the change in identity and the loss of the football player title, many players experience anger and a need to compensate (Kane, 1991). Jones points to a number of his friends who have been dealing with those feelings for a long time. Athletes feel loss during the change of identity, and this feeling can arise at any point during the transition process. There is no linear or set pattern that describes when exactly the process will take place. A player is aware of the emotional pain brought on by the loss of admiration from others; he is also aware that there is possibly some egotistical thinking involved in being so concerned with not being famous anymore or celebrated. It is beneficial not to blame the establishment. Not pointing the finger is a coping mechanism that is absent in the literature unless it is understood as a form of denial (Kane, 1991).

A player can let go of the glorified self during the transition. Remembering his upbringing and the bonding that occurred with regular people, Jones was not totally disappointed with the loss of status. In some ways, he exhibits relief because he no longer receives negative attention or jealousy like he did as a well-known football player.

He admits to wanting to return to being a regular guy. Some researchers have argued that retirement can be a relief for those players whose values change as they get older (Algerman, 2000). Pride in his background made it so that Jones's self-worth was not determined solely by performance and wealth. Looking back at his parents, he knew how to establish and maintain a

social support system as well as how to count on resources besides money to survive.

In the interviews I conducted, players went back and forth between suggesting it is the loss of identity rather than practical matters that account for hesitation in getting a second occupation (Kane, 1991). At times, Tommy Jones suggests it was mostly a practical matter. The jobs offered to him were low paying because he did not have a degree; however, he was used to making a large salary. It appears that his hesitation in taking positions might really have reflected both the loss of identity and practical matters because he not only did not finish college, but he also had no non-sport vocational competency, which is important during the transition period (Coakley, 2006). He had no established alternative career track and so he might in part have been deluding himself to think it would be simple to get a job in another field that pays well.

Extreme commitment to the glorified self of professional sport also causes some athletes to experience intimacy issues. Brandon Gold admits to having experienced personal problems that some athletes face while playing football, which they connect to their development as athletes. He had three broken engagements. He has finally married and is happy that his wife does not know the person he used to be as a player. What kept him going in the past would not make him happy in the present. Gold points out how the life of spending money and intense socializing are not compatible with married life:

“Yeah, I got married three years ago, so that was a huge wake-me-up. I had never even experienced basically what it would be like. I had never been married. I was engaged three times to different women, great women. So now I am like a completely different person and luckily, my wife doesn’t even know that life whatsoever, not even a little bit. She is from a wealthy family, but she had no concept of the person I was then or the money I spent then, which is almost helpful, very helpful I believe. She doesn’t need anything to be happy. Of course, she wants a nice home, a nice car, and food, but she doesn’t go about spending \$5,000 a night going out partying or something.”

Brandon Gold has found happiness with someone less materialistic and more frugal. She has helped his transition because her values and sense of satisfaction are different. Transition is a tough psychological process, and Gold conceptualizes his life in terms of a series of “awakenings.” He blames his previous inability to have lasting relationships in “that life,” a life filled with “traps” such as spending \$5,000 on partying.

There are other ways in which the thrill of playing football professionally can cause an individual to feel disoriented or depressed while transitioning. Transition is not only a matter of self-perception; indeed, others see athletes differently in their after-life. The confidence associated with the satisfaction of being an athlete can vanish quickly. As an experienced former player, Gold speaks eloquently about the difficulty of having his identity change so dramatically. Whereas young people once looked to the player for advice, they find little need for him after exit. Role transition entails dealing with a loss of respect. It is not only about losing privileges, friendships and salary, but also about experiencing a decrease in how one is regarded within the larger community.

Chasing Highs

A number of athletes admit that during the transition phase, they have had to come to terms with never actually having had long-lasting jobs. Even with the pressure to make money, those who played in the NFL have a difficult time finding work that is emotionally satisfying. In comparison to what they experienced while in the league, most careers simply do not allow them to achieve the same highs. Jesse Dampeer states:

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to satisfy the needs of the family and the need that I had to enjoy something, to do something really exciting and really fun and challenging. So the combination was doing what I wanted to do but bottom line—I couldn’t do it if I didn’t take care of the family. You had to make enough money to take care of the family and take care of your responsibility.

I have never really had a job. Actually, when I played my first two or three years at Grand Rapids, I went back to Oregon and worked in construction because I could make \$1,000 a month in construction, and I could make \$445 a month as a business trainee, and my family needed a few more bucks than that, so I worked six tens (60 hours) and did that for three years. Other than that, I don’t think I ever really had a job. I’ve had a project. I’ve had a business that I was trying to put together or something I was trying to create, something I was trying to do to generate income, and that has been fun. I’m still in that posture today. I still have two projects I’m working on that are just really exciting.”

Dampeer reflects a conflict experienced by many former athletes who are used to a profession that adds a strong sense of meaning and adventure to daily

life. He wants excitement and fun and a challenge, but he must also make money to take care of his family. The longer former players go without having a job, the less impressive their resumes look to potential employers. Because of the emotional intensity of sport, many players prefer to take on short-term job opportunities, remaining in a limbo phase rather than fully transitioning out of sport.

Similar to many retired athletes, Tommy Jones wants a job that is financially and psychologically rewarding. He realizes that his first step is to deal with his lack of educational preparedness, but he also seems unable to settle. He acknowledges that there will be many hurdles. Getting an education seems to be essential for most when guaranteeing life satisfaction. Even when some athletes attempt to get an education, they still may maintain time-consuming goals that are extremely difficult to achieve.

Tommy Jones estimates that it will take him a total of 15 years after the moment of retirement to finish getting a degree. Having spent ten years out of work suggests that the act of disengagement from sport was rather traumatic for him, and that it was difficult for him to imagine a satisfying life after football. Other job possibilities were either frustrating or disappointing in some way, as Jones surmises:

“In the next five years, my plan is to go back to finish my degree. I could have done it back then [after retirement], but I was too caught up in trying to do this other thing. I could have gone right to Western University (WU) when I retired.

Moving forward, I want to finish my degree and get into coaching. I know I have to finish my schooling. I am actually ten years behind the curve. I really haven’t been affiliated with any junior college here, coaching on a football college staff, getting quality assurance. So what I want to do is go back and get my master’s at WU. Right now, they don’t have a distance program for me. I’m looking into it. I don’t know if I am going to be able to do a long-distance thing at WU. So, the object for me right now is to do a program that I can work and do online, a sports coaching degree, and then I want to go back to WU and get my master’s, but in between that, I’m going to put my name in the hat.

Now, if I go back to get a sports coaching degree, I have something sports-related on my background with my experience playing in the NFL, retiring in 2000, going to WU, a sports coaching degree. Now, I have a little bit more on my resume, when I do finally get my degree. I will have all the

coaching principles and getting back into it. That is why I really want to go do that. So when I put my name in the hat with Andy Reed, at least I will have something. I don't have any coaching experience under me. Maybe doing a program that's sports-related will better my chances and make me look a little bit more marketable. That is what I am trying to do.

So in the next five years, I ultimately want to have my own sports academy. That is a dream, but I want to be a certified, athletic trainer. But right now, I want to coach six- to seven-year-olds. I'm more popular now than I was before because everywhere I go now, they recognize me. Everybody in the league knows that I played for the Grand Rapids Dragons, so people are approaching me like, 'Man, you used to train and you used to be doing this.' So in order for me to open up that option [be a trainer], I have to get that degree. I can get this one [coaching] in 18 months, and now I have something behind me sports-related, and I will have my certification to train. Then, I want to build my resume up to ultimately being a pro scout. Now that is my ultimate goal. Being a scout. I can do that. I know I can."

Not having planned in advance, the years flew by and Tommy Jones was not able to force himself to prepare for his transition until very recently. He has lofty—and many—goals. He wants both to finish a degree and to start a sports academy. For many engulfed players, fame continues to be their source of confidence even after having left sport (Haerle, 1975). Unlike other athletes, he does not report experiencing a loss in recognition during the transition phase. People still identify him with his days in the NFL. It also seems as if fame is important to Jones because he imagines that in the future, he will continue to be highly dependent on sport. He has no back-up plans; his entire interview centers on working in sport as his only option. Athletes highly dependent upon sport tend to desire to go into coaching without considering other career opportunities. Those players interested in coaching are less likely to own their own businesses as some researchers claim ex-professional players tend to do (Pitts, Popovich, & Bober, 1989).

The experience of competing in the NFL leaves some former players chasing emotional highs at work. Jesse Dampeer understands one of the major difficulties in sport transition is that an athlete is sometimes used to feeling that something momentous has occurred throughout his experience, whereas in the work world, such adventures and rewards are not necessarily so common. As he notes:

“I was chasing an emotional high that I had experienced in football. I was chasing that feeling of victory in the locker room with the guys, of winning on the field, of that incredibly emotional moment when you win the Super Bowl and you are on top of the world. You have incredible exhilaration in you, and you have shared enjoyment with all the guys. That is a wonderful thing. That is a priceless thing. I was trying to find that [after my exit]. I think I’m trying to recapture that. So a new business every now and then, every three years or four years, or whatever it happened to be. It has been an interesting journey, and life has been good, and I made enough money to live comfortably, to take care of my children and my family.”

For Jesse Dampeer, chasing highs has meant he does not stay with one profession for a long time. He does not prioritize stability even in the after-life because of his experience playing football. Not only is such behavior not necessarily realistic, but it also places stress on family life to be committed to such achievement and to chasing priceless memories. To some extent, everyone must sacrifice their personal life if they want to be successful, but Dampeer emphasizes that the commitment is in fact for his family and not for personal gain or to please others. Changing roles means changing values during the transitional phase, and one set of goals may not be realistic in the football after-life. Dampeer comments:

“I would say every father that leaves the home to work and provide for his family neglects his family to a certain extent. But we cannot spend all of our time with our family. We have to take care of our family. We are responsible for food and shelter and clothing and school and a whole bunch of other things. So I cannot sit at home and make my living sitting at home with my children and my wife. I have to go where I can make the money that they require to live comfortably. So if I have to travel to do that, I have to travel to do that. But, my number one job was to provide for my family.”

Dampeer exhibits an addiction to the glorified self, which among some athletes, makes them delusional when it comes to pursuing another career. Having participated in sport decades ago, he can only imagine what it is like for certain athletes now. He discusses knowing the limits of using celebrity as well as being confident when to rely on it. There is a balance. Dampeer shares the following:

“So if I could say anything to young ball players, is it is

almost an addiction process to the applause, to the crowds, to the lights, the camera, the action, the girls, the autographs, the whole thing. It is almost addictive, and it may be addictive. It may not be almost. It clouds your head. It clouds your thinking, and you get the feeling that you are never going to have another poor day. You are going to be doing this forever, and you don't think five years ahead of time or ten years ahead of time or 30 or 40 or 50, and maybe you are incapable at that young age, but there is going to be a time when the game is over for everyone, and that money goes awfully quick. It goes awfully fast."

Jesse Dampeer's situation is unique because he had important components in place before his transition. He saw the value of education, sought out internships and applied leadership principles. He found a support system and incorporated the foundation that the coaches preached. He had a coach that was invested in the players' professional and personal development. He was open to the advice and assistance offered to him. Dampeer took those things and applied them intrinsically to his own life and situation.

Over and over again, older former players offer up that acceptance of the short-term relationship between player and sport is one of the most important factors determining the smoothness of the transition. Anderson Smith states:

"It is definitely not a marriage. The average guy plays three years. It could be a three-year relationship, and it might be a ten-year relationship, but no matter what, you are going to go to work at some point. You are going to have to take care of your family and take care of yourself, and that game will be over. That is for sure."

Playing without a Playbook

A consistent finding throughout the research for this study is the importance of structure in a player's life. Becoming a professional player begins with a commitment to practicing, training and the team at an early age. Players are expected to follow a rigid schedule every day. In college, a player's day is scheduled from morning to night. In the pros, strict guidelines are set for the majority of the day. This structure is essential for success on and off the field. Essentially, a playbook is not just provided for on the field, but for off the field as well. A typical day during mini-camp is structured as follows:

- 6:15 a.m. Shuttle departs to stadium
- 7:00 a.m. Breakfast

- 8:00 a.m. Team meeting
- 10:15 a.m. Break meeting
- 10:30 a.m. Weight workout
- 12:15 p.m. Lunch
- 12:45 p.m. Be available for media
- 1:15 p.m. Team meeting
- 1:30 p.m. Special teams meeting
- 2:15 p.m. Position meeting
- 3:30 p.m. Break meeting
- 3:50 p.m. Shuttle departs for practice
- 4:00 p.m. Practice #1
- 5:30 p.m. Practice ends
- 6:15 p.m. Player development dinner
- 7:00 p.m. Dinner concludes
- 7:15 p.m. Shuttle returns from stadium

Routine and persistence are elements that accompany a rigid structure. Unfortunately, when the player exits sport, the structure and support does not carry over. This is a time when the player has to take charge and design a playbook for his own life. Essentially, he has to recruit a “new team” and make decisions regarding how to proceed in this next phase of life.

Anderson Smith discusses the role of structure in and out of sport. Structure adds to the intensity of the playing experience but also makes improvising in new areas of work more difficult. Playing sport includes studying, visualizing and preparing the night before the game. But such structure and rehearsing are not always to be found in the work world. Smith shares:

“Yes, the structure, and like I said, you had a plan and rehearsed that plan. You know what I am doing tomorrow. You know what time I have this meeting, what time I am going to lift weights, what time I am going to get my treatment, what time I am going to the offensive meeting, what time I am going to special teams meeting, what time we are going to go over pass protection, what time we are going to do agilities, what time we are going to blow the horn. We knew wherever we were supposed to be and what we were supposed to be doing at that time, so you had some structure there, whereas now, you are like a handful of \$100 bills just blowing in the wind down the street.”

During the transition, many players realize that although they worked in a

highly competitive atmosphere, stress was reduced by their routine and the certainty they had regarding where they had to be and when. After exit, they struggle to adjust to the spontaneity required in other occupations; nobody is forcefully telling them what they are supposed to be doing at a given moment. Terry McGill states:

“You don’t know which direction to go [now], whereas [before] you had accountability, and you knew what you had to do. When I got up, I knew what I had to do. When I was in a football game, I knew it was 3rd and 8 and I need to get to the pylon down there or else we aren’t going to convert this first down. I knew I had to step up two more steps and make this break, give a head fake, and make a break, and make this catch, whereas now, you don’t know where the pylon is. You don’t know where the first down is. You don’t know which play is going to be the big play. You are out here playing the game without a playbook, so it is a whole different ball game because you knew from the day you got the football and your playbook, they told you what you need to work on, you have to repeatedly work on those skills every day and to find those skills to be successful. But when you get out here in the real world, you have to figure out what I need to work on today. What do I need to do over here? How do I develop more relationships with people? How do I become a people-person and be able to communicate with diverse people each day?”

The world after football requires independent thinking—not simply repetitive behavior. More than one athlete whom I interviewed mentions that they appreciated the accountability that came with being a professional player. As much as some athletes rebel against the structure and the discipline while playing, some of them later miss the fact that they have individuals concerned with their performance and professional well-being, even if for a short amount of time. Walter Frank states:

“I think one thing about athletes, they are guys of structure and guys of habit. They are guys of accountability, and they are used to having stuff laid out for them—knowing where to be and when to report and how to perform and what they need to do when they get there. When you don’t have that in life, it is kind of like you are out here on an island. You are trying to figure out your next step. You don’t know if you want to go over here. You don’t know if you want to interview at this place. It is a whole different ball game. So if I felt that guys

had a chance while they are playing to find out something else that they have a passion about and get with a mentor or coach in that field and learn more about it and learn the steps and how to play that game, when they come off the field, it is going to be such a smooth transition. And then when you have an athlete who can actually play ball without thinking and just reacting, you know you have a business guy there. It is a whole different player than someone on the field thinking or looking at and trying to read everything instead of reacting.”

Many of the athletes interviewed who found themselves used to the routine and discipline of sport thought that mentoring in other areas might alleviate the difficulty of transition. One thing holds true in the minds of many players: most of their teammates had a powerful work ethic and if that could be channeled, they would be successful in other professional areas such as corporate America. Former players also recognize that other workers eventually become used to their occupations and do not constantly have to feel as if they are just starting. Individuals who are used to the structure that comes along with playing the athletic role still feel the need for guidance. Anderson Smith shares:

“Now that player can play way faster than what his 40-time may be. So now, if you take this over into corporate America or real life, and you have taught, now you know how to do your sales. You know how to do your interviews. You know how to do your presentations. You know how to do all these things, and it becomes second nature. You are not really thinking. For a lot of those guys to get to the NFL, they had to have some type of work ethic, so now you transfer those work ethics over to corporate America and you have been coached, just like you have a position coach in the league. Your transition will be seamless.

When I was playing football, whether it was in college, during the summer, doing the weight training, going to summer school, my classmates...they were doing internships. They were working their way up the ladder. When I was on the practice field learning how to run those routes or how to tackle or do things of that nature, they were learning the game of life. Now, all of a sudden, you played ten years, and you are 32 years old and out of the league, and my classmate that was in my industrial technology construction management

classes, he is 32, but he has had ten years on me. Going through the interview process, doing presentations, closing deals. So now, I am at 32 trying to compete with him. That is tough. It is tough to compete with that guy. I went through that maybe about five or six years ago. When I was looking at it, I became so frustrated because I felt that I had guys I went to school with and coached football, and it is as simple as that. You have guys doing other businesses that I went to school with, and you see them, and they are doing well and are successful with that, and I was frustrated because I was like, 'Look at these guys. They have it going on. They are doing their thing. They know what their craft is. They are pros at it. They are efficient at what they are doing.' And I was frustrated because I wasn't as far along as them.

But then, I had to sit back and think about it, and say, 'You know what? I've been doing this for a year or two. This guy has been doing this for 15 or 20 [years] because he was doing that while I was playing football.' I was talking to a buddy the other night, and he has already gotten about 20 years in coaching, and he was saying he was going to get 13 more years in pension or whatever they get from teaching. I was like, man, this guy has 13 more years. These guys were coaching while I was down there doing my thing, and it looked to them like I was the lucky one ahead of time, because I got to play in the league. They are farther along than I am."

Other jobs also provide more security, intensifying the frustration and jealousy that many athletes feel during the transition. This lack of confidence can end up greatly impeding the progress of a former player. Sometimes it is the work that is more sober and laid back that ends up leaving individuals more secure in the long run. Anderson Smith states:

"Because they have paid into the state system and they have a retirement, and you look at our inner selves' retirement and benefits, it is not that great. So you look at Malcom Bennet, one of our teammates in junior college, and he has 20 years in this business. Here we go saying, 'Man, we don't have 20 years.' So we are behind the eight ball, and what you have to do, you have to find someone, or we have to find someone that is willing to take us under their wing and mentor us and help us close that gap between us and our classmates. And

that is where the mentoring and the coaching come in, and I think if kids get that during college or just have someone to plant that seed in them as early as high school, going through college as soon as they hit the ground in college...Have them talk to NFL guys, have the businessmen come in and talk to them so they will know what to expect. If you don't know what is coming, it is like in football, if you don't see that guy coming in the cross block, you are going to get your head knocked off. So it's like you are running down the field full sprint on the kick-off, and you don't even know what is coming, and you got cut, and the next thing you know, you've gotten broad-sided, and now you are trying to get up, and you don't know which sideline to go to because you don't have any direction, because you didn't have a plan after that."

When asked to estimate how many guys out of ten coming out of the NFL will have transition adjustment difficulties, Walter Frank responds, "I think all ten will." Interestingly, though even the players most aware of the psychological condition of chasing highs at times still sound as if they want to get back on the field. Frank states:

"I think the ones that actually go into TV struggle at some point, but not as drastically as someone that doesn't have that back-up plan already in place for them. So I think they are going to go through withdrawals and setbacks because you are going to miss it. There is nowhere in the world you can go and get that same feeling you got when you were out there on that football field playing ball. You didn't have that type of excitement when you got married or with the birth of your child. You can't find it anywhere. You played in the Super Bowl. You tell me you have to find that kind of excitement that you had in the Super Bowl. I'm still searching for it—that high. There is a void that is there."

In addition to missing the high, many athletes are also afraid of being pigeonholed and stereotyped. For some, that fear translates into an inability to try to break into other fields or departments within the athletic industry. Some who are aware attempt to find a balance between remaining in a career that enriches them and becoming something other than an athlete. Frank describes:

"That is why, for me personally, I still want to be involved in sports, not as a coach because I think so many people stereotype athletes as going into coaching, especially black athletes. They are not going to look at you and say you are

going to be a GM or you are going to be a VP and an Assistant Athletic Director for Marketing. They try to pigeonhole you and stereotype you as a person as all you can do is coach. Therefore, I wanted to be on the business side, on the administrative side, and I kind of wanted to live through the coaches and the players vicariously. I wanted to vicariously live through those players and those coaches like it was me, but I want to be able to do everything I can to help them off the court or off the field to help them to be successful with their college experience on that campus or their coaching experience if they are coaching. That is the reason why I wanted to go into Athletic Administration, and it has been a fun ride, but it has been pretty difficult and challenging as well, as I knew it would be.”

It takes time to fuel a passion beyond football, and many players are intimidated by the mere thought of starting to find a new passion. Life satisfaction is difficult to achieve for many players in the after-life. Hopefully, knowing about this issue will make it possible for future, current, and former players to achieve a balance between excitement and security in their newfound professions.

Life Satisfaction and the Need for Camaraderie

Some players not only fail to prepare financially but also fail to think about what it will be like to lose the companionships they had in the NFL. Brandon Gold had heard from others while in the league how the loss of friendship and identification constitute a difficult experience, but that did not make much sense to him at the time. He now understands that the lack of continuity in experience can be very upsetting for an athlete. He admits to being sad, though certain things help keep his spirit up. But when retirement came, he admits to feeling as if he had died. The need for camaraderie can have both positive and negative effects on attaining life satisfaction.

Thinking back on the great camaraderie in the NFL allows former athletes to experience a form of continuity that buffers some of the psychological trauma encountered after retirement. Focusing on the positive aspects of the football community is particularly beneficial when athletes have been deselected. Memories of good times enable them to think about something other than no longer playing. When asked about camaraderie in the NFL, one player mentions how he misses that aspect more than the game and holds on to those memories, which makes the current difficult times not so overwhelmingly negative. Some players express clear emotional benefits

from camaraderie in the NFL. Tommy Jones states:

“You know what? That is the whole part of being an NFL football player is the camaraderie. By us even playing together, in that locker room we did everything, hung out, played dominoes, and then you think about the misery, the times of the wins, the losses with those guys. That is something that can never be replaced. I miss that more than the game. I have memories. I may not have the money...No matter what, if I ran out the door, if I see Tyrone or David Jordan somewhere, we are going to show each other love. That camaraderie...you can't replace that with nothing else, not even money really. That is just like when Green Bay has those alumni games, and they bring those teams together from back in the 1960s, you know those guys regardless of where they are in their life. When they get that call, they look forward to just seeing whoever shows up, and right then, those emotions come back all over again. We were in the trenches fighting. Don't get me wrong, we deserved to be where we were.”

Players who are more engulfed emphasize the camaraderie more than anything else. On some level, they may still be searching for that brotherhood in their current occupation. Tommy Jones states:

“I think about the relationships you have with the people in the locker room. You can work in a lot of different places; you can go in a lot of different environments, but there is no environment quite like the locker room and the camaraderie that you have with those guys who you bleed, sweat, cry and celebrate with. A lot of those relationships you have for the rest of your life. So I think that is the biggest thing you walk away from, those guys who play for double-digit years—those guys are really missed. Being around that environment—I have been fortunate to be around it. And not being in it...with the job I do now, that's probably one of the hardest things.”

The engulfed player believes that no other form of bonding can replace the locker room experience. This leaves some of them susceptible to chasing highs or to keep from being motivated in other pursuits. Yet for those who truly struggle with this change of identity, community is still possible during the professional after-life. Even though the NFL does not foster relationships between athletes after they exit, players often note that they themselves keep in touch with each other. This desire for camaraderie perhaps explains how,

no matter what the transition process is like for different individuals, most former athletes are interested in becoming mentors who emphasize the importance of well-roundedness in younger athletes.

CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSION

The Narrow Socialization of Athletes

Role engulfment is a guiding concept in this study because athletic talent has a way of affecting and even impeding other aspects of an athlete's development. Participation in sport is socialization as much as anything else. Reworking the identity after living with the label of "professional athlete" for a significant amount of time is tough. NFL players go through an intense socialization process that makes it difficult for them to move beyond the sport.

Though it cannot be said that the NFL completely created the situation in which these men give their all to football in pursuit of the American dream, managers and owners benefit from the players' commitment. Most athletes only achieve short-term success and little security. But their drive is intense and the desire of coaches to win creates a situation in which athletes can become one-dimensional.

The Problem of Being Overly Dedicated

The desire to achieve long-held goals and financial prosperity are such that some athletes are quite willing to accommodate coaches and team members—despite better judgment regarding what is personally most important. A number of players interviewed for this study discuss the importance of the early years and how they were vulnerable to such a socialization process. They began sport when their identities and ideas about the world were not yet fully formed. At each phase of their career, they met unexpected challenges arising out of their intense dedication to sport. They were not aware of the details of the college process, about what it meant to make and to have their own money, or what it was like to be around people with different social priorities.

From the very beginning when a child starts to play football, he learns to dedicate himself to the game, his teammates and his coaches. Little by little, he commits more and more of his mind, body and soul to the game. There are many rewards for him along the way to encourage him to continue to dedicate himself. As he transitions from the high school level to the collegiate level, free-time and options outside of football are reduced by the pressures of coaches, teammates, boosters and even the NCAA. The NCAA limits a student-athlete's working capacity and opportunity for internships. The skills that the athlete cannot develop because of NCAA guidelines and limitations would help with the transition to a new career after playing in the NFL.

Thinking Life in Sport Will Go on Forever

All players make the transition out of football, but not all of them consciously consider what life will be like outside of their former role as a professional player. Role engulfment prevents planning for the transition. Athletes who find themselves engulfed by their previous role often neglected school and failed to consider the eventuality of having to exit from sport. Based upon the interviews conducted, this study demonstrates distinct attitudes with respect to preparation for an after-life: some players readily accepted and planned for it; others did not study during the college phase or participate in off-season work. The latter failed to plan financially while they valued socializing intensely with other members of their team. The athletes interviewed sensed role engulfment as a change of values within them. They often spoke of reveling in the newness of the experience of living away from home, only to lose a sense of the big picture.

When an athlete can appreciate the short-lived career expectancy in the NFL, he can make long-range plans for his future after football. If a player is engulfed in his athletic role and feels like an immortal warrior, he has an extremely difficult time when his days of glory and battle are over.

How the Community Views the Athlete

Members of an athlete's immediate community often idealize him. The journey begins with a child and "The American Dream." It seems so innocent and yet so bold. When that child starts to realize the dream could become a reality, or when those around the child start to realize the child's potential, life can take a quick turn, focused on a vision with an "all in/show me the money," mentality. This begins the child's development into an idolized warrior. He becomes a hero to many, but disposable after the battle. That child needs to have the tools to succeed on the football field and in life outside of football. Edmundson (2012) explains the power of sports:

"Sports are many things, and one of those things is animation of heroic culture. Sports mimic the martial world; they fabricate the condition of war... (Boxing doesn't fabricate war; it is war, and to my mind, not a sport. As Joyce Carol Oates says, 'You play football, baseball and basketball, but no one "plays" boxing.')

This fabrication is in many ways a good thing, necessary to the health of society.

For it seems to me that Plato is right: The desire for glory is part of almost everyone's spirit. Plato called this desire

thymos and associated its ascendancy and celebration with Homer...

Plato believed that war was sometimes necessary, but that going to war should be up to the rulers, the philosopher kings who have developed their minds fully. Some of us, Plato says, have a hunger for martial renown that surpasses others, and those people are very valuable and very dangerous. They need praise when they fight well (material rewards do not mean much to them), and they need something to keep them occupied when no war is at hand. Sports are a way to do that.

Plato would probably approve of the way athletics function in our culture – they let the most thymotic of us express their hunger for conquest, rather harmlessly, and they allow the rest to get their hit of glory through identification. The yelping fan, painted absurdly in his team's colors, cavorting half-naked at the stadium, stinking of beer, is still expressing a critical part of his inner life. Let him have his Saturday afternoon, worshipping his heroes (Edmundson, 2012).

Edmundson, similar to many Americans, believes that the pursuit of a career in the NFL is rather harmless. Through my personal experience and the experiences of those whom I have interviewed for this study, I conclude that playing in the NFL is detrimental to one's life and well-being, especially for the players who are engulfed in the role of a professional athlete. Furthermore, parents and extended families can rarely provide support and advice when it comes to pursuing an education. Given that the athlete pours his all into sport, he never imagines the import of education because he never thinks about what it will be like to make a career change.

Voluntary versus Involuntary Retirement

The reason athletes exit sport plays an important part in their ability to adjust to a second career. Players who are cut find themselves in shock and unprepared versus those who had prepared for exit, whether or not it occurred voluntarily or involuntarily. Getting deselected has meaning for athletes as it also affects their self-esteem and not just their job status. Getting cut can feel like an extreme form of loss of control if an athlete is not prepared beforehand. It can leave players feeling completely destabilized especially if, in their opinion, they have much more potential as players. Such players tend to dwell in the past. Getting injured does not always leave players wounded in terms of self-esteem, though certainly it leaves them feeling disappointed.

To maintain their warrior status, NFL players must be tough and play

through many injuries. Knowing how to respect their bodies and how they will need their bodies long after playing football are keys to a healthier post-playing life. Too many times, players re-injure themselves and keep re-injuring themselves until they either have to leave the game or are asked to leave. For most, these injuries will haunt them for the rest of their life. Some former players are permanently disabled from the injuries received while playing.

Role engulfment in football makes some players feel that they are invincible and that they will be able to play forever. They will be the one who makes it in the league longer than any other. This mindset has extreme consequences for many players. Conversely, those players who are not fully engulfed in the role think about what they want to do after football. They are not willing to let their bodies take an extreme beating. These players are the ones who sit out longer if injured, even if it means they might be cut from the team. Taking care of their bodies means taking care of their future.

The expectation of de-selection is not the only factor that matters. A player's attitude toward health and finance must also be assessed. Some players find themselves more comfortable than others seeking medical attention and financial planning assistance, especially if their attitudes are not completely formed by football.

Surprisingly, injured players often fare better in the long-term than players who are deselected because of their relationship with coaches and teammates or because their skill level has been thought to deteriorate. Those who exit because of coaching decisions may have loved football intensely and may not have thought that it was their time to be cut. Permanent injury, on the other hand, brings with it a certain amount of finality.

Some players who exit voluntarily illustrate the importance of underscoring academic and second-career preparedness among athletes. They are able to pursue their second career with the most passion as they do not deal with feelings of victimization and unfairness as much as those who exit involuntarily.

Judging Transition Success

Most people assume that athletes who play in the NFL are set up for life, able to take care of family and loved ones, and that they are adored by fans and aspiring athletes until their dying day. It is hard to imagine that retired players have gone from being idols to being demoralized, depressed individuals with limited occupational skills outside of sport. The public believes that football players are rich, healthy members of a privileged class, even if they had once been poor. They are unaware of the financial instability,

emotional duress, addiction to legal and illegal medications, and debilitating health problems that most players face, making it important for research on sport transition to continue to find its way into mainstream culture.

Transition can be understood in terms of how long athletes take to find new occupations, whether or not they feel trauma, and what influence their educational preparedness or lack thereof has on them. Ex-players who were extremely confident on the field often find themselves with a sense of uneasiness in classes with younger students who are more prepared than they are.

What happens during the transition is the result of a life-long process for players who begin to construct their identities at an early age. Leaving a career that offers excitement as well as nationwide fame is understandably difficult. Attitudes toward other career options are extremely important throughout their football career to ease the transition phase. Without preparation, ex-players find themselves struggling to remain motivated and focused in the football after-life.

Those players ambivalent about a career in sport and who maintain the least amount of investment in football upon entering fare the best during the transition phase. They understand that football is an occupation no different from a number of other job opportunities; it is not a matter of personal identity. Thus, their experience of early socialization is markedly different from those with role engulfment, who view football as their only opportunity in life. That becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Football ends up being their only opportunity in life as they resist taking full advantage of their education.

Knowing how to handle finances, particularly among players who cannot seem to save and those who come from low-income families, is essential in helping with the transition out of football. Role-engulfed players believe the money will just keep flowing in. They spend their earnings frivolously. Shock and surprise are common to these players when they realize they have nothing to show for the enormous amount of money that they have earned and spent. Players experience more surprise when they have to worry about taking care of themselves and their family once the money is gone. An example of an overwhelming cost is health care coverage and quality. In the NFL, doctors are available to the player around the clock. The years of brutally intense physical activity create an extremely important need for health care. After players retire from the NFL, they are ineligible for Medicare due to their young age. Those who have financial knowledge and are frugal with their large NFL paychecks demonstrate more ease with the transition. Few players achieve the financial security that allows them to never work another day after football.

Age truly is an important factor for many athletes exiting out of sport.

Mid- to late-life transitions are difficult simply because the number of jobs an individual can get is extremely limited without experience and without much time to spend training for positions. This does not take into account how players may be experiencing depression. Adequate planning for transition takes much time. Helping athletes with this difficult transition requires a diverse set of treatment and planning activities. Many athletes describe how in becoming professional football players, they received much assistance and help. When they transitioned out, they had life skills as well as occupational skills to learn but if they needed support in those regards, they had to find it on their own. This leaves many feeling lost and helpless.

They often have to look inward later to create a narrative that explains their transition difficulties. This attests to how playing the role of athlete affects them on a psychological level. For all players, high athletic identity is a matter of personal choice and a result of pressure from family, peers and coaches.

Emotional Roadblocks that Players Face during the Transition

Retired athletes interviewed for this study mention frequently that they have felt confused or disoriented after retiring. They face a paralyzing loss of identity (Tinley, 2002). Such powerful emotional roadblocks often occur when players struggle to find a second career that offers the same intensity as football. Most office jobs do not deliver the same emotional and material rewards as playing in the NFL. This causes many athletes to experience depression.

Men from varying backgrounds with equally diverse definitions of life satisfaction come together as a team in their playing days. Oftentimes, those same players find themselves feeling abandoned and alone when the football career is over and there is no support to help them face retirement.

Life after football is not something role-engulfed players consider—until it is thrust upon them. The transition is not as smooth as it is for those who do not let the game be their be-all, end-all. The role-engulfed player spends time chasing the highs of the game as well as the fame and fortune. When the playing days are over, he is not prepared to follow another dream. Football has consumed his personal life; it is what he did and defines who he used to be. When it is gone from his life, he needs a new job and a new identity because there is a loss of self with the loss of football. Depression sets in, and he tries to hold on to his football identity as if it were comparable to holding on to a lost family member or friend. He cannot go back and play the way he used to in his prime. He does not have an alternative that gives him the same sense of chasing the highs of a warrior.

After being cut, the loss of steady income and job status wounds his sense of masculinity. This is especially true among players who attach superior value to the athletic role vis-à-vis being a husband, father and patriarch of their extended family. It could be that NFL athletes believe that their role as a player enables them to live up to traditional roles because the career makes it possible for them to lend money to family members.

Difficulties are present for role-engulfed players, regardless of their family or personal background. Role engulfment compels players to overlook education and spend money on frivolous items in an attempt to appear like the stereotypical professional athlete with an endless supply of money. Engulfed players refuse to plan for the future and get addicted to chasing highs. Role engulfment also leads to a glorified self-image as well as a limited social network. Some players are caught up in the celebrity status and do not take advantage of networking capabilities to build relationships with trustees, CEOs and well-positioned business people. Because role engulfment keeps players from doing what they should do in their own best interest for the future, many players experience debilitating self-doubt during the transition, which further spurs reluctance or procrastination when it comes to working toward a degree; self-doubt even causes many to avoid pursuing any career not related to sport. In contrast, those players who take time to build relationships outside of the glorified self have an easier time with the transition into new fields outside of football.

Suggestions for Improving Athletic Transitions

Each phase of a football career directly impacts the transition experience. Thus, a player's college career and attitude before entering the NFL receive considerable attention in this study as a means of gauging the nature and extent of his investment in sport. Completing college and participating in off-season work and internships are important ways through which athletes can maintain self-confidence after leaving the game, whether their exit is voluntary or involuntary. Proper self-assessment and preparation while in sport means often forsaking or avoiding the intense socializing and camaraderie characteristic of sport.

Academic preparedness is a matter of individual discipline and time management as much as it is about gaining knowledge. Players who do not gain disciplinary and time management skills are the most challenged in the NFL after-life.

The focus on education outside of football is beneficial because a player can imagine another role other than football. It helps keep him grounded rather than vulnerable to becoming role-engulfed in football. A player who

chooses to focus on football alone and let the academic side of his college years slide finds transition out of football to be difficult. A player who feels confident within his major or who can imagine pursuing job options outside of sport often has a sense early on that he is not limited to football, even before the scouting and recruiting begin. A person with job options or who is not the primary breadwinner is less likely to cast aside academic interests and personal interests for sport. Athletes who enter the NFL before completing their four years of collegiate scholarship eligibility are vulnerable. They do not get the full academic enrichment they sought when entering college.

As for off-season work, many ex-players I interviewed mention how they wanted to take part in off-season work but felt pressure not to or convinced themselves that they did not have enough time.

Based on the preceding, I firmly believe that encouraging pre-retirement planning, off-season work or internships, and mentoring can ease the transition of retirement from the NFL. I offer the following recommendations for programs that the NFL—or colleges as appropriate—should implement immediately.

Instituting a Deferred Salary Program

Deferred salaries would give players the ability to save more, ensuring that they have a stable financial situation during their transition. A player would have the option of deferring a portion of his salary for five to seven years after his last year in the NFL. This portion would be invested in an annuity that he cannot touch until he is five or ten years removed from the NFL.

Providing Longer-Term Health Insurance for Players

There should be lifetime coverage for former professional football players rather than merely five-year plans. The effects of certain injuries are not only prolonged but can be delayed. Many ex-players do not experience the pain of their injuries until they are 43 or 45 years old. Depending on their employment situation, they might need to dip into their nest eggs for health care, depriving their families because of injuries they sustained while playing football. Longer-term coverage would dramatically help improve the financial situation of many former players.

Initiating Collegiate-Level Mentoring Programs

Colleges should provide a mentoring program for all student-athletes upon their arrival on campus. Student-athletes would meet with their mentors five times during the fall semester and once per week during the spring. Mentors

would include businessmen from the local community—preferably alumni—and former student-athletes who have made a successful transition graduating from college to corporate America. Other mentors would include professors, who would help student-athletes integrate the athletic department more thoroughly into the university. In so doing, student-athletes would be able to network with the alumni base as well as build connections in their academic disciplines of interest, which could help lead to later employment opportunities.

Providing More Internship Programs

During the professional years, it would be invaluable to offer a series of internship opportunities during the off-season. These could cover the spectrum, from internships on Capitol Hill and in real estate, financial services, public relations and media, to opportunities within the rapidly growing technology industry. Many NFL players would do well to use their natural charisma to become politicians, public servants, businessmen, broadcasters and spokespersons. They are natural leaders; however, they need to develop business leads early on in their careers.

Facilitating Athletic Sponsorships

Comparable in concept to the collegiate-level mentoring programs, there should be sponsorship programs available to help professional athletes. This would attract pillars of the community in which the athlete plays. Sponsors would be individuals with connections in particular fields, who could open doors for athletes attempting to begin transition preparation before retirement.

Encouraging Academic Achievement

After playing in the league for several years, players should be encouraged to make sure their portfolio demonstrates that they have completed or are nearly done completing their college degree. Those who have not finished should be able to count on the NFLPA to pay for their remaining classes. Some players finish college while in the NFL and begin pursuing their master's during the transition. The NFL should provide a program through which advanced degrees from law school, business school and medical school could be paid for during the transition using union dues that athletes must pay.

Eliminating Split Contracts

A split contract means that a player makes one amount of money for playing while healthy and a different salary if he is injured. It encourages

athletes to play injured or gives the team a discount. The teams are already protected because the contracts are not guaranteed. Eliminating split contracts protects the player.

I believe the programs I have outlined would greatly ease the transition difficulty among athletes. They are suggestions for action that should begin before an athlete faces the challenge of retirement. Such programs would allow players to be well aware that life in professional football is short—and the after-life is something for which one must be prepared to ensure life satisfaction.

The Broader Significance of the Study

Greatness can be a tool or a weapon. Former General Manager of the Green Bay Packers, Ron Wolf, and President of the Cleveland Browns, Coach Mike Holmgren, preach that leaders are servants and must understand that life is more about the completion than the competition. Remembering to assist peers in their climb to greatness is one of many qualities an excellent leader displays. Wolf quotes Proverbs 27:17: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” We should not have to fear others to become great.

I learned at an early age that a person must be willing to take on a leadership role as he or she matures in an organization, program, franchise or department. I believe that it is not enough just to raise one’s own level of production; other people within the social circle must rise up too. Leaders recognize and rejoice in the success of goal achievement within the group. It is for this reason that I decided to examine a phenomenon that affects many people and groups of people.

I took on this project with the intent of studying the difficulties that a majority of NFL players experience when they exit from football. While playing for the Green Bay Packers and the Seattle Seahawks, I observed the difficulties that other players had while transitioning from the NFL into the real world. I personally experienced difficulties upon my retirement from the league. I have talked to over 5,000 current and former NFL players. I also interviewed 21 former players for this dissertation. I sought out to find common themes and issues with the hope of providing suggestions for solutions to make the transition easier.

There is not a great deal of research in this area and I am hopeful that upon reading my findings, others will have a better understanding of the struggles facing players in their post-NFL life. It is hard for everyday Americans to have sympathy for a group of men who have achieved the ultimate dream. It is my hope that through this study, “the average individual,” who may be a fan or who has never liked football, can appreciate the process that those who

have played in the NFL have experienced. In society, the NFL provides entertainment and plays a major role in the economy of major cities across the United States. The message being sent to players at an early age—in middle school, high school, college, and on a professional level—needs to include information about the after-life. The pursuit of a quality education and diversification of interests need to be top priorities for these young men; football must be secondary.

From the perspective of great teachers and philosophers, it is demeaning and foolish to reduce people to their athletic prowess. The only road to joy is having a sense of oneness with others and acting out of that sense at all times. When you do, you lose your meager and vain individuality in something larger, and then you can stop striving, stop desiring to constantly ascend. You can rest. The more ambitious you are, the more competitive you are, the less often you will experience serenity. Serenity is a state of being that allows us great ability. As Wordsworth says: “With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things.” As Schopenhauer tells us, “The man who lives in that spirit is the one who, when he passes another on the street, says to himself, ‘That too is me.’ Those who whisper, however subliminally, ‘That is another,’ live in the purgatory of individual pride and desire” (cited in Edmundson, 2012).

I hope the findings and revelations of my research will be helpful in understanding the transition process of others who go through major life changes. This research has a broader significance and wider relevance. Other populations of workers also work passionately under grueling circumstances for a time and must exit and learn to transition into another career. Professional athletes and other professionals, such as police and veterans, may seem different, but no matter what career path one takes, the role eventually ends. A second career is inevitable. Roles do change and life starts over. The story of the NFL athlete who succeeds after having to start over again could be of tremendous help and inspiration to many professionals. This study, using the Grounded Theory method, is a basis for others to continue pursuing solutions for those who have walked this same path—and for those who dream of traveling down it.